



The Mythical Hero's

2

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Otherworld Chronicles





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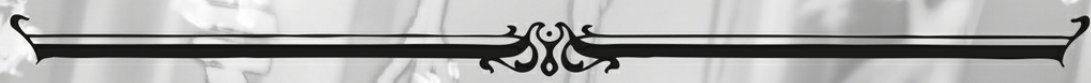
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Illust: Miyuki Ruria

Prologue

Screams choked the desert beneath the gaze of a scorching sun. Mocking jeers, dying gurgles, the thunder of horseshoes, all mingled in the morass of desperate passions called a battlefield. Every clash of blades birthed new corpses and sowed the earth with resentment. The dead glared up at the living in glassy-eyed accusation, emissaries of death beckoning them to the netherworld.

In the middle of the hellish melee lay an oasis of deathly calm—a space unto itself, isolated from the turmoil all around. Two figures faced each other down, the air between them taut with tension. One was a boy sporting an eyepatch and wielding a gleaming sword, the other a man with skin of gentle lilac, hefting a greatsword in his burly arms.

“Even now, at the eleventh hour, more men appear to oppose me.” The man swept his sweat-slicked hair back from his forehead, revealing the small violet crystal embedded in his brow. “Truly, I was not born lucky.”

The boy’s stance was so lax, anybody would have thought he was distracted, but the man knew better. He sensed the fearsome presence radiating from that scrawny body—an aura of raw might that spoke of experience on countless battlefields tempered by years of devoted study. To find it in a child so young was nothing short of astonishing.

The man broke into roaring laughter. “Gah ha ha ha! A natural-born warrior, that’s what you are!” Finding such ferocity in a boy so many years his junior, he could not help but smile. “Come, One-Eyed Dragon! A fight to the death, winner takes all! You can’t say fairer than that!”

His dry lips split into a full-faced grin. He spun, driving the tip of his greatsword—as long as he was tall—into the sand.

The boy glanced at the blade, then gave a dismissive shrug. “You zlostá and your obsession with killing,” he said. “Unlike you, I’m not a brute.”

Yet, as he spoke, his mouth widened into a savage smile, putting the lie to his words. The expression made an unsettling fit for his youthful face, sending a chill down the man's spine.

"But I'm afraid I'm in a bad mood right now," the boy continued. "So I'm not going to let you off easy."

Nothingness flowed through the boy. Shedding every last vestige of his emotions, he gave himself to the abyss. He raised his silver sword before his chest and leveled it at his foe.

Chapter 1: To the Capital

The thirteenth day of the seventh month of Imperial Year 1023

That day, as it did every day, Berg Fortress baked in the sweltering prairie heat. A girl's voice rang through the central tower, cutting through the muggy air like the chime of a bell.

"Hiro! Where are you?"

Her name was Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz, the sixth princess of the Grantzian Empire. Even as she stalked through the fortress like a mother searching for a wayward child, she carried herself with a serene grace that compelled the gaze. Her crimson hair shimmered with ardent fire, while her shapely features would bring a sigh of admiration to anyone's lips.

"Hiro!"

Yet it was not her appearance that was most striking, but the flame-red sword on her hip. Its name was Lævateinn, and it was a Spiritblade—one of five legendary weapons fashioned by the first emperor, founder of the Grantzian Empire, and the one that he had loved the best.

"Where in the world have you run off to?!"

She had only recently taken over as commander of Berg Fortress, so the complex was still a maze to her. Tracking someone down through its labyrinthine corridors was an arduous task. She clenched her fists in frustration as she walked, scrunching the ornate letter in her hands into a crumpled wad.

"Hmph." She pouted. "But he's *always* on the third floor..."

The third floor of the central tower was mostly used as a storage space for books, tools, lumber, and the like. The white wolf named Cerberus presently claimed it as her den, and she had taken to snarling at any soldiers who intruded unannounced.

"Maybe I should check his room again?"

No sooner had the words left her lips than a door opened at the far end of the dingy corridor. Out padded Cerberus, de facto mistress of the third floor. A black-haired, black-eyed boy followed behind her, his soft features at odds with his forbidding eyepatch—the very boy that Liz had been looking for.

“Hiro!” she cried, raising a hand to catch his attention.

He drew closer. “What’s the hurry?”

“I’ve been searching for you everywhere! It’s urgent!”

“Sorry. I was in the library. I needed to look something up.” Hiro glanced back at the room behind him, where the fortress’s historical records lined the walls.

“Oh, really?” Liz planted her hands on her hips. “I’m glad you’re getting yourself an education, but you could at least tell me where to find you.”

Ever since Hiro had suffered a violent fit brought on by his malfunctioning vision, Liz had developed something of an overprotective streak. He couldn’t blame her for fussing over him after witnessing his attack, but her concern could be a little overbearing.

“Got it. I’ll be more careful in future,” he said. “Anyway, what’s up?”

“Oh, right! Look, I got a reply to my letter of complaint.” She thrust out her hand.

Hiro narrowed his eyes at the wad of paper in her grip. “Is that it? It looks pretty scrunched up.”

“It’s come straight from Father himself. See? There’s the imperial signature.”

Hiro took the crumpled paper and unfolded it with a foreboding crinkling. “Did the horse carry it here in its teeth?”

“I didn’t *mean* for it to end up like that!” Liz protested. “I just got so caught up in looking for you, I forgot I was carrying it, and, well...sorry.”

She clapped her hands together in apology. With those doey eyes gazing hesitantly up at him, Hiro lost the will to be angry. It was said that beauty was its own blessing, and now he thought he understood what that meant.

“I guess it’s fine. As long as I can still tell what it says.”

He lowered his gaze to the letter and began to read.

My most beloved daughter has apprised me of your circumstances, including your notable contributions in battle against the Duchy of Lichtein. Yet before I congratulate you on your accomplishments, I must first address a more pressing issue: that of your heritage. I understand that you claim to be descended from His Majesty the Second Emperor. Determining Prince Stovell's punishment requires that this claim be verified. In view of your intimate involvement in this matter, I hereby request your immediate presence in the imperial capital.

Signed,

Emperor Greiheit, Forty-Eighth Emperor of the Grantzian Empire

"He says he wants me to come to the capital," Hiro announced.

On the one hand, a visit to the capital would provide a valuable opportunity for Hiro to introduce himself to Grantzian high society, not to mention the emperor himself. On the other, there was no telling what dangers might lie in wait for him at court. He would have to tread extremely carefully.

"Really? That's great! Come on, we'll need to pack!" Liz tugged at his arm, grinning widely.

"I'm not sure you're invited," Hiro said. "The letter doesn't say anything about you coming."

Aside from anything else, Liz's attendance would turn his visit into an imperial family affair. Hiro doubted that her enemies would move as openly against her in the presence of the emperor as they had in the past, but even so, it would be safer for her to remain in Berg Fortress.

"What? Boo." Liz puffed out her cheeks indignantly.

Hiro felt his resolve waver for a moment, but he hardened his heart. "The area around the fortress still isn't secure. What are the soldiers supposed to do if something happens and you aren't there to command? Besides, we're up to our ears in paperwork. Someone needs to fill it out, and half of it needs your signature."

Liz kept pouting. “Tris can do it.”

“Tris is... Well, not to be rude, but he’s a soldier, not a bureaucrat. I’m not sure I’d trust him with matters of state.”

“I’m a soldier too.”

“Point taken, but at least you’d do a better job than him. Come on, you can handle a few signatures.”

Bureaucracy was hardly Hiro’s forte either. Berg Fortress was in dire need of a capable civil tribune. Few officials would be pleased to see themselves assigned to a border fortress, but it would still be worth petitioning the emperor about it if he got the chance.

“All right, then.” Liz looked up at him with her best puppy-dog eyes. “But if I do a *really* good job and I get done *really* quickly, can I join you? Please?”

Hiro found himself nodding almost on instinct. “Fine. I guess there won’t be much to keep you here anyway, if you get it all out of the way.”

Liz’s act dropped instantly as she bounced away in glee. “All right, it’s a deal! Those documents aren’t going to know what hit them!”

“If you say so, but I’m warning you, there are a *lot* of—”

Hiro’s warning came too late. Liz was already streaking away at astounding speed.

“I’ll have to get her a souvenir from the capital,” he said to himself. “That should be enough to get back in her good books. Well, that and an apology.”

Leaving at night might be prudent. It would be inconvenient if Liz caught wind of his departure.

Hiro returned to his room to prepare for his impending trip.

The evening sun had slipped below the horizon when Hiro made his move, and the rest of the fortress had long been abed but for the night watch. First, he snuck down to the ground floor of the tower, then crept along the corridor, holding his breath, until he reached the door to the study. A quick peek through the open door revealed Liz slumped over the desk, fast asleep amid stacks of

papers. He smiled to himself in relief, but at that moment...

“What are you up to, you scoundrel?”

A voice rang out behind him. He wheeled around, backing away in shock. There stood an old soldier with a lantern in his hand. As Hiro watched, the surprise on the man’s face condensed into rage.

“Well, now. A knave with designs on Her Highness’s virtue, eh?! I’ll show you what for!”



“That’s not what I was— I mean, ssh! You’ll wake her up!”

The man was Tris von Tarmier, a third class military tribune and one of Liz’s closest retainers. His anger dissipated as his lantern’s light fell on Hiro’s face. “Oh, it’s you, whelp. What’s got you sneaking about so late?”

“Well, about that...” Fearing that if he hesitated, Tris would interpret it as evidence of impure motives, Hiro offered a brief explanation.

“So that’s the way of it.” Tris nodded once Hiro was done. “You wanted to ascertain that Her Highness was asleep so you could leave in secrecy.”

“I mean, I can’t exactly take her with me,” Hiro said.

“Aye, true enough. I’d not want her to leave the fortress either. Still, you’re a royal now, are you not? With the second emperor’s blood? I’d say you’re entitled to an escort, if you want one.”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea. Most of the nobles at the royal court don’t know what to make of me yet, the emperor included. The last thing I want is to come on too strong.”

Until the emperor acknowledged his claim, Hiro commanded less authority than a common peasant. It would be sensible to be discreet. If he was ever to bring Liz’s dream to fruition, his allies would need to outnumber his enemies. It would not do to sour relations before he had even begun.

“Bah,” Tris spat. “Too cautious by half, if you ask me. One look at your hair and eyes should be all the proof anyone needs, black as they are.”

“Those wouldn’t be hard to fake,” Hiro pointed out. If it came down to it, he could produce Excalibur, but that was truly a last resort. It was highly likely that First Prince Stovell would be present during his audience with the emperor. Unsheathing the Heavenly Sovereign in the emperor’s presence would allow the prince to raise an uproar about Hiro being an assassin and draw steel. The result would be the worst-case scenario: Stovell celebrated as a hero for defending the emperor and Liz executed for treason. Hiro was bound for the imperial palace now. In that swirling cauldron of desires and ambitions, there was no such thing as too cautious.

“I should be off,” he said. “Time’s pressing.”

“Aye, so it is. Am I to take it you won’t need an escort, then?”

“I won’t,” Hiro said.

“Then how do you mean to get there?” The old soldier scratched his chin. “As I recall, you never learned to ride.”

“I was planning to head to Linkus on foot and meet with Kiork.” From there, he could catch a stagecoach to take him to the imperial capital.

Tris hummed in thought. “Aye, might be it’s worth a shot.”

“What is?”

“This way, whelp. I’ve a gift for you.” Tris turned his back and strode away. Hiro followed apprehensively. Together they wound their way through the fort. Eventually, they arrived at the stables—or so Hiro thought, before Tris led him past them to an empty plot of land where a sturdy metal cage rested.

“This fine fellow’s what I wanted to show you.” The old soldier gave the cage a thump. Something inside squirmed, emitting a strange cry.

“What is it?” Hiro asked.

Tris flashed him a wicked grin. “This, lad... This is a swiftdrake.”

*

As the sun rose on a cloud-flecked sky, Berg Fortress began to wake. The morning found Tris seated in the officer’s mess hall after seeing Hiro off, grumbling to himself. The old soldier’s well-muscled build spoke of might easily equal to his younger contemporaries, but now, with his brows knotted in consternation, he looked far from the fearsome taskmaster his subordinates knew.

“Blast that whelp!” he suddenly cried. The breakfasting soldiers nearby spun around to stare at him, but he was too preoccupied by his woes to notice.

Liz wandered up to his table, so pale and lifeless that she might have been a ghost. “He abandoned me... Hiro abandoned me...” she repeated to herself as she took the seat opposite him.

To see the girl he thought of as a daughter in such a state, Tris could not help but set his own troubles aside. “Whatever’s the matter, Your Highness?” he asked.

“Hiro’s gone,” she said.

“Is that so?”

“He must have gone to see Uncle. If he can’t ride, he has to be traveling by stagecoach.”

Horses were well-practiced at sensing human emotions. They mocked those they disliked and took pleasure in unseating those who showed hesitation, but time and affection could transform them into faithful companions. Hiro’s problem was not with his technique; he sat a horse with a natural ease. It was that his mounts refused to heed him. Without fail, every single one bucked him off and bolted.

“Aye, speaking of riding...” Seeing as it related both to horses and to Hiro, Tris decided it was time to broach the topic. “Have you ever ridden a swift Drake, Your Highness?”

“A swift Drake? Of course not. You do know they’re descended from actual dragons, don’t you? They’d never let a human on their backs. Only a handful of beastfolk ever get to ride one, and they *speak* dragon.”

All of what Liz said was true, and yet Hiro had done just that, right before Tris’s eyes. In fact, not only had the swift Drake allowed the boy onto its back, it had actually lowered its head to make it easier for him.

“Come to think of it, don’t we have one in the fortress?” Liz asked. “I’m sure I remember hearing that there was one terrorizing the local towns. Didn’t we capture it?”

“Aye, we did. Until the whelp rode off on it.”

“Hah! Oh, Tris, you’re too funny.”

“That’s no jest, Your Highness. I saw it with my own eyes. The boy hopped on the beast’s back and rode off before dawn, easy as you please! I swear it’s true!” Tris finished his rant, then froze, realizing that he had misstepped.

“Oh, really? It sounds like you have some explaining to do.” Liz’s mouth was smiling, but her eyes were cold. The blood drained from Tris’s face.

“Mercy, Your Highness, I beg you!”

He barely even had time to plead before his scream echoed through the mess hall.

*

The fourteenth day of the seventh month of Imperial Year 1023

The sun hung in a cloudless azure sky, showering its rays mercilessly down onto the fertile earth. Across the grasslands, heavy with the scent of verdant greenery, a shadow raced. Its low-slung figure was smaller than a horse, but far faster, with powerful legs that propelled it onward at monstrous speed. Riding on its back, dressed in his black uniform, was Hiro.

It’s just like Tris said! Even a novice can ride one! And it’s so fast!

The wind skimmed past his cheeks, sending flower petals dancing in his wake. It felt as though he had become one with the natural world.

His mount was a gift from Tris—some kind of creature called a swiftdrake. Supposedly, they were native not to Soleil but the Shaitan Islands to the east. They had spread to Soleil three hundred years ago, when some enterprising adventurer brought several back to the mainland from a voyage overseas. The cargo had escaped into the wilds, where they had multiplied and thrived.

“Take me right on up to Kiork’s mansion!”

With his mood much improved from the ride, Hiro commanded his steed through the streets of Linkus. Although dawn had barely broken, the main thoroughfare was already bustling with pedestrians and early rising market stalls. Now that the threat of war had passed, the town was regaining its former vibrancy.

Hiro pulled up at the mansion, leaped down from the swiftdrake, and trotted up to the figure by the gate.

“Well met, Lord Hiro,” the middle-aged man greeted him. “I hope your journey was not too taxing.”

“Kurt, isn’t it? It’s been a while.”

Kurt von Tarmier served Margrave Kiork both as his aide and as the chief butler of his household. He had been the first to welcome Liz’s company when they had first arrived in Linkus.

“Quite so. Please, follow me. You and the margrave have much to discuss, and it would not do to keep him waiting.”

Von Tarmier ushered Hiro through the doors to the first floor parlor, a square room with spotless white walls. A window on the western wall commanded a view of Linkus’s affluent northern quarter. Hiro took a seat on a plush, L-shaped sofa in the center of the room. Opposite him, across the table, sat Kiork.

“So, it’s a stagecoach to the capital you’re after?” Kiork said after Hiro had finished his explanation. He took a sip of the coffee his maid had placed on the table and relaxed into his customary half-smile. “I could certainly arrange that. When do you intend to depart?”

“Today, if I can,” Hiro replied. “Would that be possible?”

“You’re in quite a hurry. Would there be any harm in going tomorrow?”

“I’d rather not. His Majesty didn’t give me a time limit, but I don’t want to keep him waiting.”

Kiork nodded. “There’s certainly sense in that.” He smiled, then softly clapped his hands. “Kurt, fetch me a pen and parchment.”

“At once, milord.” Von Tarmier bowed and silently exited the room.

Kiork watched his butler leave, then turned back to Hiro and began to rifle through his pockets. “Now, then. Even by express, it’ll be five days’ travel to the capital. I could hardly ask you to do it on an empty stomach, nor would I if I could.” He produced a plain brown pouch, which he set on the table. “This should cover the cost of any provisions.”

“I couldn’t possibly...” Hiro protested. Tris had already furnished him with eight silver dratzes for the journey—a modest sum, but more than enough to last him to the imperial capital. Kiork’s pouch clearly contained far more.

He tried to refuse, but Kiork cut him off with a raised hand. “Please, I insist. I

daresay I owe you my life several times over, and more importantly, so does my niece. I don't imagine for a moment that this repays my debt, but I hope you will consider it a show of good faith."

The margrave's half-smile never slipped, but Hiro could sense that he wouldn't be denied. Better to accept the man's kindness or they would be arguing all day.

"In that case, I'm very grateful," he said.

"Besides," Kiork continued, "if your star is rising, I'd be wise to get on your good side while I have the chance."

It was a shockingly ungentlemanly admission. Hiro smiled awkwardly. "I'll try not to let you down."

Kiork chuckled. "I look forward to it."

Von Tarmier returned with a pen, a bottle of ink, and a sheaf of parchment, which he laid before Kiork. The margrave drew up a letter with a practiced hand.

"Give this to the station clerk," he said, passing the parchment to Hiro. He kept it unfurled, as the ink was still wet. "They will ready their fastest carriage—although be warned that what you gain in speed, you may lose in comfort."

The roads made for stagecoaches were mostly owned by the state, so they were referred to as the imperial roads. In addition to receiving regular repairs, they boasted periodic rest stops where merchants sold food and water. A regular rotation of patrols stationed out of nearby forts kept monsters and bandits at bay, so they were regarded by the people as a safe mode of travel.

"Oh, and you needn't worry for your mount," Kiork added. "I will ensure the beast is well cared for."

A part of Hiro had wanted to travel all the way to the capital on the swiftdrake's back, but he had ultimately decided against it. A stagecoach would at least ensure that he got where he was going. Atop a swiftdrake, he ran a very real risk of getting lost.

"Thank you," he said. "I'll be back soon."

Kiork saw him out. Once the doors had closed behind him, Hiro headed for the station. The sun beat down on him harshly, seeking to burn, but a soothing breeze mitigated the heat with its gentle caress.

He passed between the white walls of the margrave's gate, descended the hill, and entered the well-to-do northern quarter. Past inns and taverns he strolled, before turning a corner at a bar packed with townsfolk celebrating the recent victory over Lichtein. There, the streets opened up into a green paddock surrounded by a high fence. Several dozen horses, specially bred for pulling stagecoaches, grazed inside it. A short distance away was the station, a large log building with a red-painted roof. He entered and presented Kiork's parchment to the clerk. Before long, a seven-horse carriage drew up before him.

Well, then—onward to the imperial capital. It was still called the royal capital when I left. I wonder how much it's changed.

With anticipation burning in his chest, Hiro stepped inside the stagecoach.

*

On the same day that Hiro departed for the imperial capital, something strange was afoot far to the south, on the southernmost coast of the Duchy of Lichtein.

Fisherfolk flocked to the port city of Ilnis for its plentiful variety of catches, but that was not its only claim to fame. This was a town steeped in blood and rust, where slavers docked from around the world with their cargo of flesh. Some distance from the port, where a veritable fleet of slave ships pitched in the tide, was a stretch of beach where the fisherfolk moored their dinghies. A shelter stood on the rocky shore. Although intended for returning fisherfolk to rest their legs, it was currently occupied by six sellswords clutching wicked blades.

"The duke's a bloody fool, is what he is," one of the men scoffed. "Goes and picks a fight with the empire, and he loses two of his sons into the bargain!"

"Aye, and the imperials'll come looking for blood soon enough," another replied. "I don't fancy our chances, not even all the way down here."

"As I hear it, it'll be us going to them. The duke's trying again, spouting some

bollocks about getting revenge for his boy. They say he's so desperate, he's taking on every man who'll fit a uniform."

"Oy! What do I bloody pay you for?!" a voice rang out.

The sellswords turned as one toward a portly slave merchant dressed in fine silks. Sweat dripped from his body as he huffed across the sands. Ahead of him was a young girl running for all she was worth.

The sellswords shrugged in resignation and sighed as one. Such sights were not unusual in the Duchy of Lichtein. Whether captives bought in from foreign shores or Lichtein natives stripped of their citizenship, slaves often tried to run from their slavers before they were sold. This girl was yet another in a long tradition.

"That's my cargo getting away! Stop her, you layabouts!"

Five of the sellswords turned to the sixth. "What do we do, chief?"

The man stood up from his resting place in the shade. "It's the fat ponce who puts coin in our pockets." He gestured with a thrust of his chin. "Bring her in."

The sellswords set out down the beach at a comfortable clip. They overtook the sweating slaver in short order and soon caught up to the girl.

She came to a halt surrounded by burly soldiers, her face a mask of terror. "Please... Please, let me go," she whispered.

"Sorry, girly. Gotta make a living."

"A few more years on her, she'd be a real looker. Shame she'll never get that old."

Slave girls rarely survived to become adults. They usually succumbed to their brutal living conditions before they could—not that it earned them any mercy. Slaves were property in the Duchy of Lichtein. When one wore out, their masters would simply buy another.

The slave merchant finally caught up to them, huffing. "Waste my time, will you, brat?!" he wheezed. He seized a handful of the girl's hair and flung her to the ground, eliciting a cry of pain, then planted a foot on her head and ground her face into the sun-scorched sand. She thrashed desperately, trying to get

away from the heat, but there was no escape for her with his ample bulk pinning her down.

“Pull that again and I’ll slit your throat, you hear me? Eh?!”

“That’ll do, boss,” one of the sellswords ventured. “You’ll kill the poor girl.”

The slaver turned to him with a cruel grin. “And what if I do? It’s none of your business how I treat my property.”

“As you like, then.” The man scowled in distaste, but he said nothing more.

The leader of the sellswords sidled up, stifling a yawn. “Seems you’ve caught the little lady.”

“Eventually!” The slaver pulled a face. “Once you laggards got around to doing your bloody jobs instead of—”

“Now, now, don’t be like that. All’s well that ends well, eh?” The chief sellsword gave a mocking grin. “Right. Ought to be off, I reckon. It’s too blasted hot here.” He swung around—and his jaw dropped as he saw an enormous figure looming over him.

“Now, who in the world are you?”

The newcomer stood taller than anybody else present. The chief sellsword shrank back, reflexively drawing his sword.

<“Hmm. Scrawny arms, narrow shoulders... You must be a human.”>

“That some kind of foreign tongue? I don’t have a bloody clue what you just said.”

<“I have found my way to Soleil, then.”>

The large man brushed his hair from his eyes with an irritable hand. The violet crystal embedded in his forehead gleamed as it caught the sunlight.

<“The common tongue here is...Grantzian, I believe.”>

“Oy, big guy. I’m talking to you.”

“Apologies,” the man rumbled in heavily accented Grantzian. “Do you understand me now?”

“You an imperial?” the chief sellsword asked.

The large man frowned. “Do I look like I belong to one of your human empires?”

The chief sellsword looked the man over for a moment, then his jaw suddenly tightened with comprehension. “Bugger me, it can’t be...”

The man’s lilac skin and muscular build would have told the tale by themselves, but the violet crystal embedded in his forehead left no room for doubt. Only one race in Aletia matched those characteristics.

“You’re a zlostā?!”

The man grinned. “Well deduced, human.”

“A zlostā?!” the slave merchant cried in surprise. “If that’s true, he’s worth a fortune! Seize him, you louts! I’ll pay you triple!”

One thousand years ago, the zlostā—or the fiendkin, as they were colloquially known—had swept across the land in a riot of conquest. The humans, dwarves, álfar, and beastfolk had stood against them as a coalition known as the Fourfold Alliance. After a long and bitter struggle, the alliance succeeded in destroying the zlostā homeland, but it had failed to eradicate the race entirely. Most of the remaining zlostā crossed the ocean to the Ambition archipelago south of Soleil, fleeing persecution. As far as anybody knew, there they remained, although the raging seas that isolated the islands from the rest of Aletia made it impossible to know for certain. Not all zlostā had made the crossing, however. Some had refused exile and remained behind in Soleil.

“The empire keeps what’s left of them on a tight leash nowadays. They only come up on the markets once in a blue moon, and it’s always some scrawny wretch with barely a trace of real zlostā blood left in them. This one, though...pure as you please. The coin from him will set me up for a dozen lifetimes!”

To the northeast of the Grantzian Empire was a nation called the Kingdom of Lebering. Long ago it had been founded as a haven for persecuted zlostā, but the empire had since annexed it under the guise of making it a protectorate.

“Seems to me you’re offering us a raw deal, boss,” the chief sellsword said.

“We might be looking at a pureblood zlostas here, from the look of him. Make it five times and we can— Guh?!”

Before he could finish, a gout of crimson exploded from his body. Blood gushed from the gaping wound in his torso. His innards sprayed across the sand with a sickening *splat*.

“Bah. Wherever I go, it’s all the same. Slaves this, coin that, as though you could ever put me in chains. You don’t even understand the fight you’ve chosen.” The zlostas heaved an exasperated sigh, clutching a bloodstained greatsword in his hands.

“Chief!”

“You’ll pay for that, you bastard!”

The remaining sellswords readied their weapons and charged.

The zlostas snorted. “It’s always the weakest curs that bark the loudest.”

He sent three of them flying with a single easy swing, painting the beach with their viscera. The remaining two saw what happened to their comrades, glanced at each other, then turned tail and ran.

“Oy! Get back here!” the slaver cried. “What about your reward?!”

“It’s not worth my life!” one called back.

“You dare call yourselves mercenaries?!”

“Fear not. They shall not escape,” the zlostas intoned. He dropped to one knee and slammed the palm of his hand into the ground. Farther up the beach, the sand erupted beneath the fleeing sellswords, tangling their legs and sending them sprawling.

“What the—?!”

“Something’s got my leg!”

A dust cloud rose up in front of them. For a moment it hung in the air, then a greatsword clove through it to sever their heads. Gore spattered across the sand.

“Just as feeble as the rest of their kind,” the zlostas said, stepping over their

bodies. He slung his sword onto his back and strode toward the slave merchant. “And now that that is settled, only one question remains. What am I to do with you?”

“Now, don’t be hasty!” the man sniveled. “Yes, that’s right... Why don’t you work for me? We could be partners! I’ll pay you ten times what I— Mmph!”

The zlostá’s hand closed over the slave merchant’s unsightly face and lifted him off the ground. The slave girl lay unconscious beneath the man’s dangling feet, her face bright red. The zlostá’s gaze lingered on her for a second. When he looked back up at the slaver, his eyes were cold.

“Death is the only cure for fools like you.”

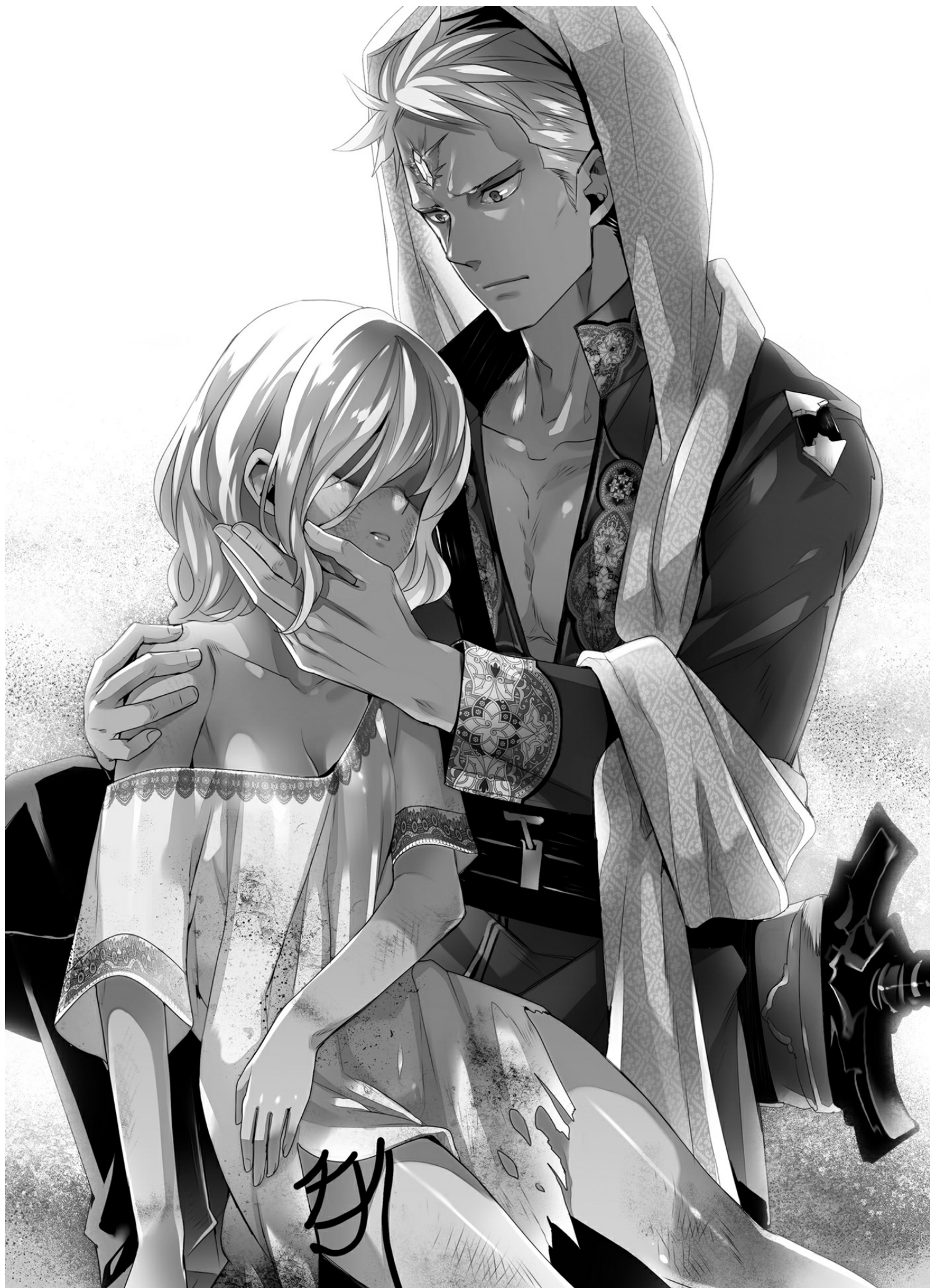
The slaver screamed. Blood squirted from every orifice—his eyes, nostrils, mouth, ears. Some of it splattered across the zlostá’s face, but the gargantuan man only watched impassively. Once the deed was done, he tossed the limp corpse aside.

“A new beginning is in order, it seems,” he whispered to himself, kneeling next to the fallen child. He tenderly brushed her inflamed cheek before gathering her in his hands.

“I have already died once. Let’s see how far a dead man’s strength can carry him.”

He set off along the beach with the girl cradled in his arms, bound for he knew not where.

*



In the Spirit King's sanctum in Baum, ruled by the álf known as the archpriestess

In the verdant heart of the forest lay a deep blue spring flecked with wisps of mist. This was the heart of the Spirit King's sanctum, the Baptismal Sanctuary—a sacred place that only the archpriestess was permitted to enter. The álfen woman stood waist-deep in the water. Her eyes slowly opened. In their depths, closer to turquoise than the aquamarine of the pool, miniature lights burst and faded.

"Is this zlosta's arrival your will?" she whispered.

Her gaze fell on the sphere of light hovering before her, situated between two enormous statues. It gave her no answer. It never did.

"Then I shall assist as best I can."

A ripple spread through the spring as she rose to the bank. Droplets of water trickled down her clavicle to vanish between her ample breasts. Her sheer shawl clung wetly to her skin, accentuating her sculpted curves. She reached for the kimono lying on the bank, slipped it over her shoulders, and set off into the forest. Through lush woods she hurried, until she arrived at a familiar passage. For a while she wended her way in silence through white-walled corridors. At last, she came to a spacious hall where the temple's knight-priestesses awaited.

"Bring me ink, a pen, and a sheaf of paper," she commanded.

The knight-priestesses tensed at the anger in her voice.

"At once, Your Grace," one said. She signaled to her squire.

"Right away!" the squire piped up before vanishing down the corridor.

The captain of the knight-priestesses stepped forward hesitantly. "Your Grace, your clothes..."

"I fear this is too important to wait," the archpriestess replied.

"You have seen something?"

"Indeed. I must inform the emperor with all haste."

The squire returned at top speed, clutching a selection of writing implements.

“Here, Your Grace!” she managed between wheezes.

“Thank you kindly,” the archpriestess said, giving the girl an encouraging smile.

The captain was less impressed. “Show some manners in the presence of the archpriestess!” she barked, planting her hands on her hips. “You’ll learn your etiquette someday or you’ll stay a squire for life!”

“Apologies...mistress...”

“She gave no offense,” the archpriestess said. “Leave her be. Let her rest.”

She cast a searching gaze around the chamber. The knight-priestesses inferred her meaning and fetched her a wooden chair. She placed the sheet of white paper on it and began to write.

“Take this to the Knights of the Spirits, with the instruction to convey it to the imperial capital immediately,” she said, her eyes never lifting from the page. “Is that understood?”

She bit her thumb and, after checking that she had drawn blood, pressed it to the letter. A change came over the paper as the scarlet bead seeped into it. It began to glow with a faint light, before rolling up of its own accord. She handed the scroll to the knight-priestess at her shoulder. The knight excused herself and took off down the corridor.

“I have done all I can,” the archpriestess whispered as she watched the woman go. “The rest depends on you, Lord Schwartz.”

* * *

The seventeenth day of the seventh month of Imperial Year 1023

The five-day journey to the imperial capital was far from luxurious. Kiork had commissioned a stagecoach that prioritized speed over any and all comfort, to the point that every bump in the road would propel its unfortunate passenger’s head into the roof. It was, in a word, miserable. Accordingly, Hiro woke on the fifth and final day to excruciating pain.

“Urgh... I’m not gonna miss this. I don’t think I slept a wink...”

He sat upright, massaging his aching body. Expelling a heavy sigh, he looked

around the carriage. Its sparse furnishings were horrendously uncomfortable, but at least it had enough space for him to lie stretched out. An expanse of grassland rolled past outside the window on the right.

As he watched with bleary eyes, the front window opened inward. “Awake in there, young man?” the coachman asked, peering through. Hiro raised a hand in reply.

“Best make ready to disembark. We’ll be arriving soon.”

The stagecoach rattled as the window snapped shut again. Hiro slid his legs down from the seat and began gathering his belongings.

The express stagecoach did not terminate directly at the capital, but at a station one sel—or three kilometers—away. After they pulled in, Hiro thanked the coachman and exited the carriage. His jaw dropped at the sheer volume of people. The station was packed with people of all stripes: nobles and commonfolk, sellswords and adventurers.

“I guess that’s what you get in the biggest city in the land,” he said to himself. “I thought the Linkus station was busy, but this is something else.”

Hiro made his way out of the packed station. The scent of newgrown leaves tickled his nostrils as he stepped outside, carried on a pleasant breeze. A stagecoach service nearby offered passage to the capital, but he decided to walk instead. He had a pressing matter to attend to, and he could only do so on foot.

I’m being followed.

He couldn’t risk allowing his pursuers to attack him in the open. Innocent people might get caught in the cross fire. He slipped down a shallow footpath by the roadside and counted the hostile presences that followed him.

Three...six...eight of them.

Amateurs, most likely, given how easily he had sensed them, but it would be premature to make assumptions.

Guess I should make the first move.

He could wait for them to spring their trap, but the scuffle could attract

nearby guards, and without any documents to prove who he was, he might end up being taken away for questioning. Even if he could verify his identity, the guards might very well be in on the plot, in which case they might detain him for who knew how long. He didn't have that kind of time to waste.

Now...who first?

Hiro pinpointed the location of his closest pursuer, then suddenly spun toward them. Space split apart at his fingertips, depositing the handle of a dagger into his grip. As the man reeled back in shock, Hiro slipped behind him to press the point of his newly manifested spirit weapon into his back.

"Struggle and I'll kill you," he whispered into the man's ear. "Now, tell your friends to back off, nice and easy."

"All right! All right! Just spare my life!"

The man cast a desperate glance at a rocky outcrop, where one of his comrades—a man with a scar on his cheek—was posing as a traveler. The scar-faced man raised his arms and waved them over his head. Hiro felt the presences around him recede. He pushed his captive forward, prompting him to walk.

"I'm going to ask you some questions now," he said. "Answer them or don't, it's your call. I'm happy to see if your friends talk any better." He slid the dagger's point down the man's back, opening a tear in his grimy clothes.

The blood drained from the man's face. "Let me live and I'll tell you anything you want!" he whimpered. Hiro's threat had been an empty one, but the man folded almost immediately. Hiro noted that his legs were trembling.

Amateurs. I knew it.

"Who hired you?" he asked.

"I don't know who he was, I swear it," the man said. "He dropped a fat lot of coin in my hand and told me to rough you up. That's all I know."

"Really?" Hiro's eyebrows arched. "And how did this man approach you?"

"I'd just got done in the fields for the day when he showed up out of nowhere. A real odd one he was too."

“Odd? In what way?”

“Kept his hood pulled low so I couldn’t see his face. The only reason I can say he’s a man is on account of the voice.”

Hiro flipped the dagger around in his grip. He pressed the pommel into the man’s back, prodding him to continue.

“Pick a fight with you and get the guards to take you in. That was all he wanted. I turned him down at first, but then the blighter dropped two golden grantzes into my hand. Couldn’t say no after that.”

So he was nobody, just a gullible fool lured by the promise of gold. His fellow would-be footpads had probably all been hired from the same village.

“I’m not proud of it, but no man of my station would’ve turned that down. You wouldn’t kill me for that, would you?”

Hiro sensed no lie in the man’s words. Pressing the matter further was unlikely to bear any fruit.

“You’re free to go,” he said, “but make any funny moves, and I won’t be asking any more questions. I never want to see your face again. If I do, anywhere, anytime, I’ll cut you down on the spot. Is that clear?”

“Crystal,” the man said, nodding feverishly. “You’ve seen the last of me, I swear.”

He turned tail and ran, leaving the footpath to cut straight through the grasslands. He never looked back. A handful of other figures—probably his accomplices—stumbled in his wake. Hiro watched them flee until they were out of sight, then set out once more for the capital.

That certainly is the last I’ve seen of them. I’m sure their employer will take care of that.

Such a generous reward for such an easy job could only mean one thing: failure would not be tolerated. Though the running figures did not know it, they had just signed their own death warrants.

The real question is why he used peasants to do his dirty work.

If this cloaked man had intended to waylay Hiro, why had he not turned to

professionals? At the very least, hiring trained fighters would have guaranteed enough of a scuffle to draw the attention of the guards.

Well, I can worry about that later. It's been a long time since I last visited the royal—the imperial capital, I guess it's called now. I might as well enjoy myself.

Casting speculation from his mind for the time being, Hiro came to a stop and took in the city before him. A stately gate rose austere over the road ahead. Enormous battlements rose into the sky above it, looming over him with an unblinking gaze. A deep moat, drawn from the River Kendel to the north, hugged the foot of the walls, its depths teeming with aquatic creatures. A drawbridge spanned the water, thronged by travelers from both directions. Hiro merged with the crowd and let it carry him across the bridge. After an inspection at the gate, he passed through the portal and emerged inside the city.

“Whoa...” he breathed.

A stunning sight greeted him on the other side. A wide boulevard paved with large flagstones extended from the gate deep into the heart of the city. On either side, at regular intervals, rose statues tall enough to touch the sky—the likenesses of the Twelve Divines, painstakingly rendered in bronze. The eyes of the gods surveyed the boulevard from on high, as though welcoming new arrivals. Covered stalls, packed with customers, lined up shoulder to shoulder at their feet. The cries of merchants and hawkers filled the air.

“The buildings weren't anywhere near this tall last time I was here,” Hiro mused. “Not to mention how much busier it's gotten.”

He set off down the boulevard. As he glanced around, taking in the sights, he spied a group of people with bottles in their hands, day-drinking in front of a liquor stall. Their drunken cries rang in the midday air.

“Faerzen's no more, and good riddance! Bring me another bottle! Today, we celebrate!”

“Better to drink to the sixth princess for putting the desert wolves in their place!”

“And not alone, as I hear it told! Word is, Schwartz's heir himself fought by

her side!”

Passing beneath the gazes of the Divines, Hiro came to the other end of the boulevard. The street opened into a park, where a magnificent fountain cast a jet of water high into the air. The font lent the scene a solemn mystique, made elegant by the ever-present trickling of water and the sparkling of the spray in the sun.

People of all kinds filled the plaza: a couple with their children, a passed-out drunk, a student poring over a book. The air here was serene, very different from the hustle and bustle of the gatefront streets, but the people wore much the same smiles on their faces. No doubt the entire nation was basking in its recent victories over Faerzen and Lichtein.

A voice came from behind Hiro’s back. “Lord Hiro, I see. What an unexpected pleasure.”

Hiro turned to find Laurence Alfred von Spitz, Aura’s handsome young aide. “Likewise,” he replied. “What are you doing here? I thought you were headed back west.”

“I should be asking you the very same thing. What brings you to the capital?”

“A summons from His Majesty.”

“Ah, I should have known. It was only to be expected.”

“So? What about you?”

“His Majesty requested my commander’s presence before we returned to the west,” von Spitz said with a sigh. “Hence, here I am.”

“The emperor wants to see Aura?”

“Higher up the chain, I fear. Third Prince Brutahl.”

Von Spitz set off walking, so Hiro fell in behind him.

“His Majesty was not best pleased to learn that the prince was using the Third Legion’s finest as his own private army, especially while he himself was away on campaign. I imagine my commander is explaining himself as we speak.”

“He shouldn’t have tried to capture Liz, then,” Hiro said. “He only has himself

to blame.”

“By happy accident, his scheming did bring us together to fend off Lichtein. That may lighten his sentence somewhat.” Von Spitz paused. “The real question is what will become of First Prince Stovell. Now, *that* has the whole palace in uproar. Every noble in the court is whispering about either his attempt on the sixth princess’s life or how he assaulted Emperor Schwartz’s heir.”

“Huh,” Hiro said.

“Well, he still has Mjölnir, not to mention the support of House Krone. It’s a fine line His Majesty will have to walk, sentencing the man with the largest faction at court. I don’t envy his decision one bit.” Von Spitz glanced at Hiro and shook his head in exasperation. “And now Emperor Schwartz’s heir himself is here in the capital, adding yet more fuel to the fire.” He turned his eyes to the sky and stared into the middle distance. The silence stretched on uncomfortably.

Hiro gave an awkward smile. “So where are we going?”

“Somewhere quite singular. I could tell you if you like, but I expect you’ll enjoy the surprise.”

By then, the pair had made their way to the eastern boulevard. While its central counterpart had been lined with statues and stalls, here the roadside was packed with smithies, weapon shops, and stores selling a variety of practical wares. Adventurers and sellswords steadily increased in proportion among the passersby, lending the streets an unsavory air.

As Hiro looked around in fascination, von Spitz turned into a narrow gap between a guardhouse and an inn. Hiro followed him into a dingy alleyway. For a while they walked in gloom, until they emerged into the light again to find themselves standing in front of a timeworn temple.

“As you see, my lady precedes us.”

Von Spitz gestured beneath the shade of the trees. Indeed, there sat Aura. Her right arm, broken in battle against Lichtein, hung in a sling, but she flipped dexterously through a book with her left hand. A group of soldiers stood nearby, clad in forbidding black armor, cutting an odd sight with their arms

piled high with candies. A gaggle of children surrounded them, clamoring for the treats in their hands.

“War orphans,” von Spitz explained. “The Temple of the Spirits strives to take care of those who have nobody else.”

“So that’s why there are so many of them,” Hiro said. “Why is the temple so far out of the way?”

Worship of the Spirit King was common in Soleil and particularly prevalent in the Grantzian Empire. Temples for the spirits surely saw no end of supplicants, so why was this one built somewhere so obscure?

“The spirits prefer it here,” von Spitz said.

Hiro immediately understood what he meant. This place was an oasis of greenery, isolated from the hustle and bustle of civilization outside. Grass covered the ground, dotted with red and white flowers swaying in the breeze. Bathed in the sun’s rays, the temple’s gentle radiance seemed to cleanse the soul.

“The rest of the eastern quarter has become a rather seedy place in recent times—something of a haunt for adventurers, sellswords, and the like. Efforts were made to resist the changes, but they bore little fruit.”

“I bet,” Hiro said. “Now they’ve settled down, you can’t exactly clear them out again.” It was difficult to remove anything once it had put down roots, and any attempt would face enormous resistance.

“Quite so. Instead, we erected a guardhouse to ensure the children’s safety. I believe you passed it on the way in.” Von Spitz paused. “The Knights of the Royal Black man it presently. Its previous commander was...lacking in diligence, shall we say. Lady Aura felt that the eastern quarter would be better served by her taking a more direct role in maintaining the peace.” There was more than a hint of pride in his voice.

Aura seemed to notice them then. She stood up from her spot in the shade and walked toward them.

“You’re the last person I expected to see.”

Hiro raised a hand. “Hey. It’s been...well, not all that long, I guess.”

She gave a small nod. “I sent a letter, but only yesterday. That can’t be why you’re here.”

“The emperor sent me a summons.” Hiro shrugged his hempen bag off his shoulder, laid it on the ground, and rifled through it, before producing a scrunched-up piece of paper. “Here.”

Aura blinked. “This is a summons?”

Hiro couldn’t blame her for her confusion. The letter had been in poor shape when Liz first handed it to him, and five days in his pack had done little to improve its condition.

Aura cast her eyes over the paper and nodded. “So that’s how things are. I see. How did you mean to get into the palace?”

“I hoped my hair and my eyes would be enough.”

“They won’t be. All the court factions are at each other’s throats right now. The guards won’t give you the time of day.”

“Then I’ll just show them the letter.”

“Nobody would believe *this* was an imperial letter.” Aura passed the crumpled paper back to Hiro. “Luckily for you. Most people live their entire lives without ever seeing one. These are supposed to be treated with respect. If the guards did believe you, they’d have you executed.”

Hiro smiled sheepishly. “Fair point.”

“There’s nothing for it. I’ll accompany you.”

“What?”

“If I’m with you, they’ll let you through.”

“I mean, I appreciate it, but...” Hiro glanced behind her, where a group of children were assembling. Behind that, her Knights of the Royal Black—the pride of the Third Legion—lay defeated beneath a wave of small bodies.

“Where are you going, Miss Aura?” A girl with a lisp tugged at Aura’s sleeve.

Aura patted her head and smiled. “To the palace. Sir Spitz will play with you

while I'm away."

Hiro could have sworn von Spitz's eyes momentarily bulged, but if Aura noticed it, she didn't show it. "This way," she said, and set off.

"My lady!" von Spitz cried. "I'm not equipped to take care of— Gyaaah!" With youthful boisterousness, the children surged forward and toppled him. Within moments, he had vanished from sight. "Unhand me, you ruffians!" came a shout from beneath the pile. "I am a noble, not your plaything!"

"I'm Schwartz the fop-slayer!" one of the children cried.

"Then I'm General Rey!"

"Fine, but I get to be Emperor Artheus!"

"Stop that! Get off! Stop prodding me!" von Spitz cried, but his protests fell on deaf ears.

With the beleaguered viscount's screams ringing behind them, Hiro and Aura returned to the fountain plaza and turned north along the central boulevard.

Aura turned to him as they walked. "When the people look up at the imperial palace, they see a paradise where the chosen few live in splendor, but that's only one of its faces. The other is a cesspit of jealousy and ambition. Never forget that. Never let your guard down. Is that clear?"

"It is," Hiro said.

"Many people will approach you. Trust none of them. Don't let them flatter you into serving their interests. Be careful of women most of all. Even emperors have met their downfall that way."

"You're not worried for me, are you?" Hiro said.

Aura's tongue seemed sharper than usual today. He wondered if that might be the reason, but he only earned himself a fierce glare for his trouble.

"Shut up and listen," Aura snapped.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Remember, His Majesty only summoned you, not me. When it comes down to it, I won't be there to help you."

“I’ll be fine. Maybe my etiquette could use a bit of brushing up, but I’ve got a feeling things will work out.”

“I can only hope so.” With that, Aura fell silent.

They crested a gentle hill and came to an enormous wrought iron gate. It stood at five times Hiro’s height, looming over them with a solemn presence. Spiked protrusions jutted up from the top like spears.

One of the sentries recognized Aura and hastened up to them. “Welcome, Brigadier General von Bunadala. What is your business today?”

Aura gestured to Hiro. “His Majesty the Emperor has commanded me to escort this individual to the palace.”

The sentry looked Hiro up and down with an appraising eye. “I fear I’ve heard no such thing. Apologies, but I cannot let you pass.”

Hiro frowned. That was not possible. The emperor had personally written his summons; surely the guards had received instructions to allow him in at the gate. Some third party must have conspired to ensure that they never received those orders, or perhaps this sentry in particular was in somebody else’s employ.

“Tell me your name and affiliation,” Aura said.

The guard looked taken aback. “My lady?”

“If you presume to doubt the word of Third Prince Brutahl’s chief strategist, there will be consequences.”

The threat was clear. *Let us pass or lose your job.*

“My lady...” The sentry grimaced, debating furiously with himself. A bead of sweat trickled down his cheek. After a long moment, he bowed his head and relented. “You may pass.”

The man looked so defeated that Hiro almost felt sorry for him, but Aura was already stalking indignantly through the gate, so he hurried after her. On the other side lay a grand estate patrolled by a small squadron of soldiers. Conscious of the guards’ distrustful gazes, Hiro advanced along the broad central avenue. Rose gardens lined the road on either side. Ahead of him, a

large fountain marked a crossroads.

To the west was a residential district where the more powerful nobles had their manors, while the east hosted the barracks and training grounds of the Knights of the Golden Lion, the pride of the First Legion. Straight ahead to the north was the imperial palace of Venezyne, the beating heart of the Grantzian Empire. As Aura pointed each landmark out, she suddenly stepped up close to him.

“That sentry was in the employ of House Krone,” she whispered. “Be careful of them. They’re supporters of the first prince.”

Hiro gave a small nod of reply.

“Have you heard about the death of the head of House Kelheit?”

He had. Three months prior, the head of House Kelheit—the great house with dominion over the eastern nobles—had passed away, leaving his widow matriarch of the household. His official cause of death was a riding accident, but there had been ample evidence to suggest foul play.

“House Krone is the most likely culprit. I can’t prove it, but they’re plotting to pressure Countess von Kelheit into marriage and take over the house. If they’re bold enough to do that, they wouldn’t hesitate to slip poison into your dinner.”

“Understood. I’ll be careful.”

As he thanked Aura for her advice, they came at last to the doors of the palace proper. Hiro’s breath caught in his throat, not at the edifice’s beauty, but at its familiarity. From beneath a thousand years of additions and renovations, the ghost of the old royal palace stared down at him. Something akin to homesickness rose in his chest.

It’s like coming back home after a long holiday.

The royal palace had been the first place he had visited after arriving in Aletia. There, he had sworn his oath of brotherhood with Artheus. There, he had met the companions with whom he would bring peace to the battle-scarred lands of Soleil. There, once his war was won and his empire stood tall, he had bid this world farewell. It was where everything had begun, and where everything had ended.

Whatever's waiting past these doors, I won't let it stop me, he vowed.

This would mark the beginning of a new story. A new legend. With his chest dancing in anticipation, Hiro strode through the portal.

Upon entering the palace, they had to pass through a full-body inspection, conducted by a guard in Hiro's case and a female official in Aura's. Once they had received the all-clear, Aura turned to Hiro.

"We have an escort," she said.

Sure enough, behind her, Hiro spied an older gentleman approaching them.

"I am glad to see that you have safely arrived in the capital," the man said with a bow. "I am told that you have traveled far. I am Byzan Graeci von Scharm, chancellor to the empire." He raised his head to reveal an affable smile. "Am I to understand that you are Lord Hiro?"

Hiro started. "Yes, Hiro Oguro. That's me."

"And it is you who claims to be descended from His Majesty, Emperor Schwartz?"

"That's right."

"Then I am afraid I must ask you to prove your heritage. Would you be so kind as to follow me?"

Chancellor Graeci turned and headed deeper into the palace. Hiro and Aura fell in behind him. The right wall of the corridor was occupied by windows, rounded at the top, stretching the full length of the passage in a lavish display of wealth and power. Paintings on the roof extolled the glory of the Spirit King and the Twelve Divines. Among them, a black-clad swordsman who might have been Hiro faced down a horde of enemies.

Chancellor Graeci's voice resonated before them as they walked. "Many have professed to descend from the second emperor over the years. Every last one proved a fraud. Even now, we see no end of pretenders hoping to try their luck. I hope you will not hold it against me if I remain skeptical of your identity. Lady Celia Estrella clearly sees something in you, but frankly, I expect nothing more than another opportunist."

No doubt the man had seen countless false claims. Hiro could hardly blame him for growing cynical.

“It is only natural that a military nation such as ours should hold its god of war in the highest regard. I, too, count myself among Mars’s faithful. I cannot express how disgusted I would be to find yet another scoundrel had falsely claimed his bloodline. I daresay my very guts would boil with rage.” Chancellor Graeci stopped before a closed door and turned to face them. “I pray that you are no such scoundrel. For Lady Celia Estrella’s sake, if nothing else.”

The chancellor inserted a key into the lock and turned it. Hiro and Aura followed him through into a room with white walls that struggled to compensate for the lack of windows. A black overcoat hung from a large clothing stand in the center. Aside from that, the room was bare.

Chancellor Graeci strode to the clothing stand and motioned for Hiro to join him.

“To date, over two thousand people have claimed to possess the blood of the War God. Every last one perished the moment they donned this garment.” Carefully, reverently, he lifted the overcoat from the stand and spread it wide. “This is the Black Camellia, which once adorned the shoulders of Mars himself. The spirit within chooses her master, much as the Spiritblade Sovereigns do. Her curse will strike down any other who dares to wear her...unless their bloodline carries the Spirit King’s blessing. That is how you will prove your claim. Are you ready to proceed?”

Hiro nodded.

It’s been too long, old friend.

This overcoat had been his constant companion across countless battlefields. He felt no fear as he reached out to take her. He even felt a fond smile spread across his face. Yet as his fingers closed around the fabric, the Black Camellia slipped from Chancellor Graeci’s arms and flopped to the floor. A frown creased the chancellor’s brow. There had been no wind, and Hiro could see that he had not dropped the garment intentionally.

Oh boy. She’s mad at me.

The entity housed within the black garb was unusually willful and tempestuous, even by the standards of the five great spirits. It was little surprise that she was angry with him, especially when he had left her to gather dust for a thousand years.

I'm sorry I left you alone for so long.

He stooped to pick up the fallen overcoat, but it slid away from his grasp and flapped up into the air. Chancellor Graeci's eyes widened, while Aura's gaze narrowed intently. Hiro hesitated. Apparently, this relationship was going to take more mending than he thought.

At that moment, the dark cloth swelled, entwining itself around his limbs. It pulled him in and swallowed him whole in the blink of an eye. Where Hiro had been, now only a globule of darkness remained, pulsating in a manner unpleasantly reminiscent of chewing. The process happened so fast that Aura and the chancellor could only stare.

"As I thought," the chancellor sighed. "Another pretender." The man made no attempt to conceal his disappointment. No doubt he had witnessed the same sight many times before. Yet before his eyes, the darkness began to stir. Slowly, it unfurled like a bud in bloom.

Astonishment washed over Chancellor Graeci's face. "Remarkable..."

Hiro stood there once more, seemingly unperturbed. His school uniform was gone, transformed. Now he wore a black military uniform cut in the old imperial fashion, with an overcoat jacket of deepest sable layered on top. Twin dragons entwined along the ridges of his shoulders, their golden trim striking against the black.

This was garb invested with the grace of the spirits. A relic of the War God himself, possessed of mystique and dignity in equal measure. Here in the empire, they called it the Black Camellia, but in a far-flung land, it went by another name:

Regalía.

"I dared not hope..." Chancellor Graeci collected himself and sank to one knee in a vassal's bow. "Please forgive my earlier discourtesy. To lay eyes upon a true

scion of His Majesty the Second Emperor is an honor beyond words.”

Hiro laughed uneasily. “Please, you don’t need to bow. I’m not the man himself, just someone lucky enough to have his blood.”

In fact, Hiro was very much the man himself, but Chancellor Graeci might well faint if he learned that. Regardless, it was uncomfortable to have a man easily three times his age treating him with such reverence. He glanced at Aura for help but received only an enraptured stare. Evidently, he was getting no assistance from that quarter.

He looked back at Chancellor Graeci, whose head was still bowed. “Is that everything, then?”

“Not yet, I fear. You must next journey to Frieden.” The chancellor inhaled and exhaled several times, then continued. ““Those who claim the blood of Schwartz shall be put to the proof at Frieden. They whose claim is true shall be furnished with a suitable title. May the Spirit King’s curse fall upon any who defy these words.’ You are familiar with Emperor Artheus’s last will and testament, I presume?”

Hiro nodded.

The chancellor stood and headed for the door. “Ideally, you should have visited the Spirit King’s sanctum first, but we could hardly allow just anyone to meet with the archpriestess. Should any harm befall her on our account, we would earn the outrage of the entire continent. Instead, we have taken to first testing claimants with the Black Camellia, for our own good as much as hers.” He gestured for Hiro to follow him into the corridor. “A test that you have passed. Next, you must ride for Frieden, where the archpriestess will—”

The chancellor halted. A guard was rushing toward them.

“Lord von Scharm!” the man shouted. “A Knight of the Spirits arrived but moments ago bearing a letter for the emperor! She claims it’s from the archpriestess herself!”

“For His Majesty himself? This is urgent indeed. I will be there presently. See that the envoy is shown through.”

“Yes, my lord!” The guard gave a bow and hurried back the way he had come.

The chancellor turned to Hiro. “My humblest apologies, my lord. It seems I must attend to a pressing matter. Might I ask you to wait a while until I return?”

“I don’t mind, but where do you want me to wait? Here?”

“Gracious me, no. The Chamber of Nobles should suffice.” The chancellor’s gaze fell upon a nearby maid. “You there! Show Lord Hiro to—”

“I’ll show him,” Aura cut him off.

“Very well, Lady Aura will guide you. I will return forthwith.”

Chancellor Graeci departed at a brisk clip. Hiro watched him until he was out of sight, then he and Aura set off for their own destination.

“Letters from the archpriestess are rare,” Aura said. “Ones for the emperor, even rarer.”

“Really?”

“Usually, she relays the Spirit King’s revelations to the chancellor. If this one is addressed to the emperor, it must be important.”

“So that’s why Graeci looked so worried.”

“He’ll take it straight to the throne room. The survival of the empire might depend on it.”

Aura came to a set of double doors. She pushed them open with a comfortable motion and took a seat on a sofa inside. Hiro sat down opposite her.

“I wonder how long he’ll take,” he mused aloud.

“Not too long, I don’t think. But it depends on the letter.”

Hiro shrugged. “I guess all we can do is hope it’s nothing serious.” Looking around the room, a thought struck him. “You know, the Chamber of Nobles sure is empty.”

“It’s meant for nobles who don’t own mansions on the palace grounds, but few people use it. Many minor nobles have homes in the city. Most of the rest prefer to pass the time in an inn.”

“Do you have a mansion in the palace?”

“Only on paper. I don’t use it. I sleep in the guardhouse when I visit the capital.”

They traded small talk for perhaps twenty minutes before the doors opened again. It was not Chancellor Graeci who entered, but a senior official.

“Please excuse me, Lord Hiro, but your presence is requested in the throne room.”

“I thought the princes’ hearings were happening,” Aura said. “Are they over already?”

The official nodded. “They have concluded without incident. I have been instructed to ensure that Lord Hiro is present when His Majesty issues his verdict.”

“May I join him?”

“Lord von Scharm has advised me that you may attend if you wish, but you are to enter through the rear door. Lord Hiro is to enter through the front.”

“All right,” Hiro said, rising from the sofa. “I guess we shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

“No. We shouldn’t.” Aura stood up too, following his lead.

“Please, this way.”

With the official hurrying them onward, Hiro and Aura left the chamber behind.

Chapter 2: The Black Prince

A red carpet split the throne room down the middle, running across the broad flagstones beneath a high ceiling. Pillars extended along either side of it, all the way to the throne. The spaces between them were filled with nobles, the familiar figure of Prince Stovell among them, standing shoulder to shoulder in neat rows. On the throne reclined the emperor, a man of remarkably youthful features, though by all accounts he was not a day under sixty. Chancellor Graeci waited at his right hand.

Hiro looked wholly unperturbed as he strode down the carpet, though the air hung so heavy that any ordinary man would have wilted. The Black Camellia flapped at his heels. Whispers rose from the ranks of the nobles as he walked.

“Do you suppose he’s truly the second emperor’s heir?”

“He’s scarcely more than a child...but is that the Black Camellia I see on his shoulders?”

“He’s young, it’s true, but he carries himself like a king.”

“He stands tall and proud, though one could cut the air with a knife. Confidence he has aplenty, but is it born of merit or ignorance?”

Hiro came to a stop a short distance from the emperor. He thumped his right hand against his left breast and fell to one knee. The motion generated a gust that sent his overcoat aflutter before it sank back down to rest on the ground.

“You may begin,” the emperor pronounced. His brilliant jade eyes looked down on Hiro all the while.

Chancellor Graeci took a solemn step forward and unfurled a scroll of parchment.

“First Prince Stovell and Third Prince Brutahl, your sentences have been determined. Present yourselves before the throne.”

The barrel-chested figure of Prince Stovell sank to one knee on Hiro’s right.

Prince Brutahl—a bald man with ill-natured eyes—followed, mirroring the motion on Hiro’s left.

“Third Prince Brutahl, you are issued no punishment.”

A delighted murmur arose from the third prince’s supporters.

“First Prince Stovell, you are stripped of the honors you earned during the Faerzen campaign and sentenced to three months’ house arrest.”

The first prince’s supporters breathed audible sighs of relief. Even the third prince’s backers dared not question the leniency of the punishment—their own patron had gotten off just as lightly, and that mercy could easily be rescinded. From the undeclared nobles, however, came a flurry of indignant whispers.

“Preposterous! The man sought to kill his own sister!”

“Is wielding Mjölnir enough to forgive him any crime?!”

“They ought to kick him down the order of succession— No, strip him of command of the First Legion!”

Chancellor Graeci’s voice cut through the burgeoning dissent. “Silence! Silence in the presence of the emperor!”

The room fell quiet as a millpond, but there was no concealing the resentment and outrage that continued to simmer beneath the surface.

He’s just angered half his court. What’s his game?

Both of the princes’ sentences had been unreasonably lenient—the kind of decisions that might cast doubt on an emperor’s judgment. Hiro could only presume that the man intended to quench such sparks of discontent before they could catch.

“Lord Hiro. In view of your accomplishments in battle against the Duchy of Lichtein, you are elevated to the position of third class military tribune.”

That was a suitable enough reward, Hiro thought, but Chancellor Graeci was not done.

“Additionally, in accordance with the last will and testament of His Majesty the First Emperor, you are to be inducted into the Grantzian imperial

household, where you will be granted the title of fourth prince of the empire. Accordingly, you will take fifth place in the imperial line of succession. Your position may rise further as your future achievements warrant.”

Hiro struggled to keep his head bowed. That was unbelievably generous. He had expected to be added to the foot of the royal table and begrudgingly carved out a portion of some border province.

A stunned silence filled the throne room. Nobody could speak. As the room looked on, shocked, the chancellor produced a sheet of white paper. It emitted a gentle glow, although no special light fell upon it.

“The archpriestess herself has testified to the truth of his heritage,” he declared. “Furthermore, the Black Camellia has acknowledged him as her master.”

The nobles’ gazes moved frantically between Hiro and the archpriestess’s letter.

“Lord Hiro, henceforth, you may call yourself Hiro Schwartz von Grantz.”

Chancellor Graeci gave two brisk claps. At his signal, several ladies-in-waiting entered and unfurled an enormous flag. The emblem of a dragon stood proud on a black field, clutching a silver sword.

“You are hereby permitted the use of His Majesty the Second Emperor’s standard. May you prove yourself worthy of his name.”

Hiro could only smile to himself. Virtually all that he had once had was his again, and he hadn’t even had to lift a finger.

The sly old fox...

If the emperor had demoted either of the princes in the line of succession—or, worse, stripped them of their succession rights entirely—he might have faced open revolt from their supporters. Instead, he had defanged those supporters by handing out unexpectedly lenient sentences before blindsiding them by installing a new prince. A descendant of Mars himself would represent a tempting opportunity for any noble. Anyone who backed such an individual could hope for tremendous support from the people. At this very moment, every lord and lady in the room was no doubt calculating whether to switch

their allegiance now or wait to see how events played out.

He's thrown me to the wolves to get them off his own back.

It would likely be the undeclared nobles who would approach him first. They would be able to move quicker than their counterparts mired by factional ties. It was they who had been most dissatisfied with the emperor's judgment, although now they would be less concerned with dissenting than with leveraging the situation to get ahead of their fellow elites.

Well, that suits me just fine.

Many people would approach him from here on out, hoping to use him for their own ends.

It's only fair that I use them in return.

Hiro's lips curled in savage mirth.

"A banquet will be held shortly to mark these proceedings. I wish you all an enjoyable evening."

With that, Chancellor Graeci and the emperor retreated from the chamber. Prince Stovell and Prince Brutahl also departed with their vassals in tow. In their place, servants filed in to make ready for the banquet.

As Hiro stood there, wondering what to do, Aura made her way up to him.

"Anybody would think that wasn't your first royal audience." She fixed him with a probing gaze.

Hiro gave an awkward laugh. "What do you mean?"

"You just paraded yourself in front of the most powerful nobles in the empire. Anybody would have been terrified. But you looked like you were used to it. You looked like you'd done it before."

"Did I really? I felt pretty scared. The eyepatch must just have made it hard to tell."

"If you say so."

Odds were that she had realized who he was. She was certainly sharp enough.

Hiro sighed. "Let's say, theoretically, a figure from the past suddenly

appeared in the present day,” he said, lowering his voice. “What do you think would happen?”

Aura’s eyes narrowed. She hesitated, choosing her words carefully. “Theoretically?”

“Theoretically. How do you think they’d be received?”

“If that did happen...if, say, a hero from a thousand years ago appeared in the modern day...I think many people would find it inconvenient.”

“I agree.”

“The people would love them,” Aura continued in her detached monotone, “but the powerful would resent them. Forces would come together to crush them before they could threaten the status quo. They would need to disguise their true identity behind a more acceptable front. To conceal their true power...or to pass themselves off as their own descendant.”

“That’s an interesting idea.”

“Well. Not that many people would believe they were a living god even if they shouted it from the rooftops.”

“True.”

“But nobody can see the future. Their true identity could be exposed at any time. They would be wise to prepare for the worst.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.” Hiro’s voice hardened with resolve.

Aura’s eyes flashed mischievously. “Theoretically.”

“Ha ha, yeah, of course. That’s what I meant.” Hiro ruffled his hair awkwardly, hoping she hadn’t noticed his slip. Aura only smiled.

A pleasant melody drifted through the air as the music corps commenced their performance. Hiro looked around to find the servants retreating to the wings, the banquet preparations complete. A crowd of nobles filtered in through the open doors. He watched for a while, taking a few deep breaths to calm his nerves.

All right, it’s sink or swim. By the end of the night, I need to figure out who I

can trust...and who I can't.

It would be wise to make contact with House Krone too, while he could. Better the enemy he knew than the one he didn't.

Of course, I should let them be the ones to come to me.

The other way around might set the rest of the nobles whispering. The last thing he wanted was to start rumors that the second emperor's scion and House Krone were in cahoots.

Well, that's if they attend at all. I doubt they will.

As supporters of Prince Stovell, to appear at a banquet while the prince himself remained under house arrest would constitute a shocking breach of etiquette. Besides, this was no time to let drink cloud their judgment. Ground they had thought was stable was crumbling beneath their feet. They needed to act fast or they might find themselves in free fall. No doubt they were racking their brains for their next move at that very moment.

Prince Brutahl and the western nobles will probably be here, though...

A tug on his sleeve interrupted his thoughts.

"Hiro...I have to go."

"Huh?" He swung around to find Aura looking at him with upturned eyes.

"I can't be seen with you any longer."

Of course. Aura was Prince Brutahl's chief strategist; she was expected to remain with his supporters. For her to be seen with the newly installed fourth prince would start all manner of unsightly rumors. It may even kindle suspicion that she had defected, and those who wanted her gone would jump at the chance to fan the flames.

"Sure. I don't want to hurt your position."

"Later, then." With a lingering glance, she departed. Hiro watched her trot away through the crowd.

Prince Brutahl puts a little too much stock in the advice of his retainers...which is to say, he's easily manipulated. That's probably why so many people flock to

him.

The short glimpse Hiro had gotten of the third prince suggested a deeply paranoid man. That could be useful in its own way. The right words in the right places would be all it would take to nudge him in a desired direction. If a stubborn obstacle presented itself, the man might make a powerful ally.

The real question is how I get close to him.

A thousand years ago, he had disdained this kind of politicking. He had spent every moment he could on the battlefield, only rarely returning to the palace. That negligence had cost him dearly, to the point that he had given everything up and returned to Earth. This time, he could not afford to shrink from affairs of court, even if his inexperience would likely see him tripping over his own feet.

This is the path I chose. The least I can do is see it through.

He collected his thoughts, accepted a glass of water from a waiter, and approached a long serving table with a lavish spread. Several nobles saw him move and took that as their cue to gather. All wore extravagant jewelry over garish finery.

Like a flock of preening peacocks.

As he smiled internally at the image, an important-looking noble stepped forward from the throng.

“Lord Hiro Schwartz, I presume. I am honored to make your acquaintance.”

Hiro took the man’s hand. “And I yours.”

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am...” The man launched into a long-winded diatribe of an introduction. “I pray our relationship is a long and fruitful one,” he finally concluded.

In brief, he owned some land in the western territories. That made him a backer of Prince Brutahl like the rest of the western nobles. While the third prince had escaped the emperor’s wrath this time, he might not be so lucky the next. Evidently, some of his supporters were looking to hedge their bets.

“As do I,” Hiro replied. “I will be sure to remember your name and your face.”
As those of an opportunist, he silently added.

With that, the dam broke. More and more nobles gathered around him, all offering their daughters' hands in marriage or their sons' services as retainers, every last one all but drooling with greed. They had him trapped for almost an hour before he managed to excuse himself. He sank into a sofa by the wall, trying his best not to let his exhaustion show.

I didn't expect there to be so many of them...

He drained his glass of water in a single gulp and cast his gaze around the room. Many nobles were craning their necks to keep their eyes on him, waiting for their chance. He was far from done with introductions for the evening.

But I haven't seen a single person from the central territories, never mind from House Krone itself.

He had suspected House Krone and their central nobles would be absent, but it still came as a disappointment. He had put no small amount of effort into preparing himself for the confrontation. Now it would go to waste.

Also notable was that the most frequent overtures had come from the eastern nobles.

House Kelheit's control must be slipping after the death of their head.

None had directly said as much, but he had sensed from many a certain dissatisfaction with the leadership of the widowed Countess von Kelheit. Not from all, though; in fact, she had no shortage of ardent supporters. It seemed inevitable that the two camps would eventually clash and a schism would form.

All according to House Krone's plan, I'm sure.

As Aura told it, House Krone, staunch supporters of Prince Stovell, were looking eastward with eager anticipation. Now that the head of House Kelheit was gone, it was likely only a matter of time before they assumed control over the great house's weakened remnants. If Hiro simply stood by and watched, the first prince would soon secure the throne.

So the question now is—what do I do about it?

As he sat lost in thought, a shadow fell over him.

"Excuse me, but may I join you?"

He looked up to see a woman clad in a scarlet dress. She looked down on him with bewitching blue eyes, her wavy hair gathered into a rough ponytail that fell over her shoulder like a golden waterfall. Her shapely curves seemed to draw every eye in the room. The slit in the leg of her dress was cut scandalously high, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of thigh that would set anyone's animal instincts aflame. Yet it was not her beauty that Hiro noticed most, but the ripple of whispers that spread through the crowd as she approached. He regarded her warily, conscious of the eyes around them.

"But where are my manners?" she exclaimed. "I am Myste Caliar Rosa von Kelheit, once third princess, now acting head of House Kelheit. A pleasure to make your acquaintance." She flashed a heart-stopping smile. "Now I understand why Liz speaks so passionately of you. Your hair and eyes I'd heard of, but your features, too, are a rare delight."

Hiro managed not to let his astonishment show, but his heart was pounding furiously in his chest.

Why is she here? It's far too early for her to make her move.

He had expected that the Countess von Kelheit would approach him eventually, but not for a while yet.

Is she really that desperate?

Time to speculate was a luxury he couldn't afford. He couldn't risk tipping her off that he was more astute than he seemed. Liz's sister she might be, but her duty to House Kelheit would come first; if she was approaching him, it was because she meant to use him. By letting her throw him off-balance, he would only be playing into her hands. He had to reclaim the initiative. Forcing himself to maintain his composure, he indicated the seat beside him.

"By all means. It's not taken."

"Much obliged." In Rosa's hands were two glasses. She laid the one filled with burgundy liquid on the table in front of Hiro. It was most likely wine or some alcoholic beverage, but with no way of knowing whether it was laced with something, he opted to refrain.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I don't drink."

“Oh? Do excuse me. Here, this one is water.” She switched the glass for the other, which contained a clear liquid. The scent of rose petals wafted into his nostrils as she seated herself beside him.

“So, what business does Liz’s sister have with me?” he asked.

“She wrote to me about you, you know. I thought it was time I met the man to whom my dear sister owes so much.”

“Only a fraction of what I owe her. It is a great honor to meet a member of her family.”

“Oh, come, Your Highness, let’s not be so stiff with one another. As of today, you rank higher than I do. What would the other nobles think to hear you speak so?”

“As you— I mean, fine. Is this better?”

“Much better. Just remember to spare a thought for your station in future.” Laughing, she took a sip from her glass, then inclined it toward him with an impish grin. “Passing over such fine wine, though... Now that’s a true faux pas.”

“Wine doesn’t agree with me.” That was the only excuse he could give. The age of adulthood in this world was fifteen.

“A shame. It makes certain necessary ordeals much more enjoyable.”

“With how dangerous things have been recently, it seems safer to be teetotal.”

Rosa snorted. “I don’t know whether to call that prudence or cowardice.”

“I do. It’s cowardice.”

“That from the man who just looked the emperor and his court in the eye and didn’t blink. May I ask why you think so poorly of yourself?”

From the corner of his eye, Hiro saw Rosa lean closer. His face took on a hollow cast.

“I’m scared of regretting my choices. In battle, say...no matter if my enemies scream or cry or beg for their lives, I won’t show them any mercy. Not unless I can make use of them, anyway. By letting them go, I might bring misfortune

down on the innocent, and that I couldn't bear."

For a while, Rosa only stared. Perhaps it was because of the change in his face that she looked so aghast; perhaps it was because she had glimpsed the madness in his heart. She drained her glass and called to the waiter for more wine. The man returned with a glass of white, the aroma of which she savored for a while before speaking again.

"How old did you say you were?"

"I'll be seventeen this year."

"That's quite the twisted attitude for somebody your age. Conceited, even." Rosa gave a low chuckle. "Now I'm wondering what kind of past could produce a man like you."

"Nothing interesting, I promise you. A handful of battlefields, that's all."

"Really? Well, tell me. If I were to make myself your enemy right now, what would you do?"

"Nothing at first. But I'd draw a line, and if you crossed it, I'd take your head."

"You wouldn't just kill me outright?"

"My fuse isn't that short. I'm not a brute."

"So you prefer to think things through before you act."

"Animals give in to their impulses. Human beings know it isn't worth it. I'd only create more enemies and alienate my allies, and in the end, I'd be left with more regrets." Hiro's eyes took on a distant look as he spoke. For a moment, a shadow of remorse passed across them, but it was gone before Rosa could see.

Rosa nodded to herself, ruminating on his words. She crossed her arms, pushing up her breasts in the process. "Like Stovell?"

Hiro thought about that, but no clear answer presented itself.

"I don't know him well enough to say. I can tell one thing, though. If I'm twisted, he's worse."

Rosa laughed. "You're right about that. It's a shame. There was a time when he would have made the model emperor."

“What changed him?”

“Mjölnir. It chose him when he was eighteen. He was never the same after that. He lost the ability to care about the feelings of the people beneath him. Now he truly believes that might makes right and weakness is to be despised. He’s convinced he’s the strongest of all and fears nothing more than being shown that he isn’t.”

“I was right, then. He is twisted.”

“There are no limits to human greed, and coming into power is when that shows the most. Power changes people. You should be careful of that yourself now that you’re a prince.”

“I will.”

Rosa’s tongue wetted her lips. Her mouth curled into a smile. “Now, time is upon us. I think we’ve danced around the point long enough, don’t you?”

She was making her move. Hiro had to focus or this panther would tear off his head.

Playing games will only give her time to scheme.

No, the best move here was to cut straight to the heart of the matter. That would bring the conversation back onto his terms.

“Because House Kelheit has no more time to spare?” he asked.

For a fraction of a second, something dangerous flashed in Rosa’s eyes. “You’ve done your research, I see. Not that I can complain. It’s my shortcomings that made it so obvious.”

“If your nobles had toed the line better, I wouldn’t have known.”

“If you’ve noticed that much, then there’s no point trying to hide it. Yes, the eastern nobles are on the verge of splitting in two. It’s a man’s world we live in. A female head of house presents certain challenges that many would rather do without.”

“Like succession passing through the male line in the empire. Even the great houses aren’t above that, I take it.”

“No, we are not,” Rosa sighed. “And so I must put up with endless suitors.”

“I don’t blame them,” Hiro said. “All of House Kelheit’s assets are on the table. Their family would become one of the most powerful houses in the empire overnight.”

“I’m not interested in some other house’s good-for-nothing second son.”

“I’m sure you could find someone better than that.”

“Maybe, if I tried. But what I really need is somebody who isn’t anyone else’s pawn.”

Hiro fell silent for a moment, but finally answered. “It won’t work, you know. Marrying me won’t get you what you want.”

Rosa shook her head. “I’m not asking you to marry me. I doubt you’d want to anyway.”

“Then what? Are you hoping to have a prince speak up on your behalf? I’m in no position to interfere in a great house’s affairs. Not yet, anyway.”

“True enough. But there is one thing you can do.”

“And what’s that?”

Rosa didn’t reply, but cast a wary gaze around the hall. Someone, somewhere was likely listening in, although it would take exceptionally sharp hearing to make out their conversation through the clamor of the banquet.

With a sigh, Hiro looked down at the glass on the table. Until now, he had avoided touching it. Rosa had brought it for him, so the chance was high that it was laced with something or other.

But if the alternative is to keep circling around each other like this...

He steeled himself, took the glass in hand, and drained it. The contents tingled as they passed down his throat, but otherwise, nothing happened. Still, that was proof enough that his suspicions had been correct.

“Just to be certain,” he asked, “was there something in this?”

Rosa’s eyes went wide. “I’m impressed. You shouldn’t even be able to speak.” She cleared her throat and forced a smile, but dropped it just as quickly,

evidently deciding that pretense was useless. “A potent paralytic. It was supposed to addle your mind, but no such luck.”

“You’d only make things worse for yourself, drugging someone in public.”

“Would I? You’d hardly be the first man who couldn’t hold his liquor in my company.”

“You’ve thought this through. I assume you’ve made plans to get me out of here too?”

“Not that it matters now. I have to say, I didn’t count on you being so resilient. I wonder if you’re even human.”

Hiro smiled apologetically. “Of course I am. Just a little tougher than most.”

She laughed weakly. “I should have thought to slip you monster tranquilizer.”

Whatever she had intended to tell him in private, she couldn’t now. Her gaze fell dejectedly to the floor. Now that her scheme had been revealed, she should have been making herself scarce; the fact that she wasn’t could only mean that her back was to the wall. In view of that, Hiro decided to lend her a helping hand.

“Don’t give up just yet. Keep going. I’ll play along.”

Rosa’s lips parted in surprise. “Are you certain? I’m no assassin, but I still tried to poison you— Ah!”

She yelped as Hiro pulled her close, bringing his lips to her ear. “Then I might as well clear the plate. Make me your offer, and then I’ll decide.”

Rosa grinned. “To think I let that boyish face fool me. Beneath it, you’re quite the beast.”

She wrapped her arms around his head, pressing his face into her ample bosom. She might as well have kicked a hornet’s nest. Instantly, the hall was abuzz with whispers.

“His Highness appears to have exceeded his limits,” she called out to the crowd around. “Would somebody be so kind as to help me carry him back to my mansion?”

Three ladies and two gentlemen volunteered their services. They approached without hesitation, almost as though they had been expecting to be called upon. Rosa's plans, no doubt.

"Some poisons are sweeter than others," Rosa whispered into his ear as the men hoisted him upright. From a distance, she would simply have looked as though she were assisting. "I'm sure you'll find mine quite irresistible."

"I look forward to finding out."

"Shall we be off, then?"

"Stop," a quiet voice interrupted.

Rosa spun around to see Aura. "What a pleasant surprise. What can I do for the illustrious Lady von Bunadala?"

"Where are you taking him?" Aura demanded.

"I'm afraid the situation is quite urgent. I will be happy to explain everything...later."

Rosa snapped her fingers. At her signal, her three women stepped forward to encircle Aura.

"Why, Countess von Bunadala!" one cried. "We'd so hoped to speak with you!"

"Get off me!"

"Now, now, let's have none of that."

With her spirit weapon absent and her arm in a sling, Aura could muster little resistance. The women had no difficulty keeping her trapped in place.

Rosa ran a slender fingertip down Hiro's eyepatch. "Now that that's taken care of, shall we go somewhere quieter?"

The nobles carried Hiro from the chamber and across the palace estate to Rosa's mansion. There, all but Rosa excused themselves, leaving the two of them alone in a moonlit room. Rosa took a seat in an intricately decorated chair, while Hiro reclined on an enormous bed large enough for five people to lie abreast.

“I should apologize,” the countess said. “I’d expected things to go more smoothly, in more ways than one.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Hiro said. “Still, I think it’s time you told me what this is all about.”

“Very well. Although by this point, I’m sure you’ve guessed.”

“More or less.”

The entire banquet hall had witnessed a drunken prince and an eligible widow exchange a scandalous embrace, then retreat to the latter’s mansion long before the night was done. It was not hard to imagine what they would conclude.

“If I let it be known that I was your mistress,” Rosa said, “I could finally keep my suitors at bay.”

“Only for a while. You’d still need to find a husband eventually.”

“True. If I were only your mistress.” A shaft of moonlight fell on Rosa through the window in the dark of the night, limning her sultry figure with a silver glow. “But what if I were to bear your child?”

Hiro almost forgot how to breathe. “Wha...?”

“That is how I will thwart House Krone’s ambitions. I will become your lover. I will use your authority as the fourth prince and the second emperor’s heir to bring my nobles back in line. Then I will bear your child and install them as the new head of House Kelheit. I told you, didn’t I? What I really need is somebody who isn’t anyone else’s pawn.”

“The rest of House Kelheit won’t stand for that. I’d effectively be taking over the house.”

“If it means bringing Emperor Schwartz’s blood into the family line, they’ll stand for anything I ask them to.”

“But neither of us—” The triumphant grin on Rosa’s face stopped Hiro’s protest in his throat.

“No, the bloodline would not die out. We would marry the child to the daughter of a branch family. The von Kelheit line would endure, strengthened

by the blood of Emperor Schwartz. How could any of them object to that?"

Hiro could only listen.

"And you'd be richly rewarded for your trouble. You'd have me in your bed every night, as well as the support of all the eastern nobles. Not a bad deal, don't you think?"

It wasn't, especially in view of the challenges ahead. Rosa's personal virtues aside, Hiro was most lacking in funds and connections. House Kelheit could provide him with both.

"Besides, I'm not asking you to get me with child tonight. I'm no loose woman, no matter what you may think. I'd appreciate some time to ready myself...although I won't force my reservations on you if you don't care for them. We could do it now, if you like."

Hiro struggled to piece together a reply. "I'll happily be your ally," he finally said, "but I'm not interested in children."

Rosa gave a low chuckle. "I'll be content with that, for now. A part of me does dread what Liz might say."

She stood up, walked over, and eased herself onto the bed. It creaked beneath her weight as she moved closer.

"Now, it's gotten rather late. We ought to turn in for the night."

"Do we really have to share?" Hiro asked. "I can take the sofa."

"That would defeat the purpose. I want to know that we slept together, even if not in the way people think." With a mischievous grin, she wrapped herself around his arm. "Although don't hold back if the mood takes you. I won't push you away."

"Can't we at least sleep on opposite ends of the bed?"

Rosa's only reply was deep, regular breathing.

"You drop off just as quickly as your sister."

Faint memories of a night in the mountains flitted through Hiro's head. He closed his eyes and, swaddled in feminine softness, fell into a deep slumber.

*

Great paintings covered the walls from corner to corner, while curios from all over the world decorated every surface. Every last piece was a work of the finest craftsmanship, turning the very room in which it lay into an ostentatious display of power. This was the Chamber of the Sovereign, where the emperor himself resided, a hidden location that only his most trusted retainers knew existed. In the center stood Chancellor Graeci, and before him lay the seated figure of the forty-eighth emperor of the Grantzian Empire, Emperor Greiheit.

The emperor regarded the chancellor with a hawk's eyes, a wine glass in one hand. "Is there something you wish to say?"

"I wonder only if you were too lenient with the first prince," the chancellor said. "If you intend to take advantage of Lord Hiro, surely it would do no harm to weaken his competition. A demotion in the line of succession would not have gone amiss."

"That would impede the necessary groundwork for our future plans. This you know as well as I."

"You speak of our intent to topple House Krone."

"The ancient houses think of nothing but self-preservation. House Krone are no exception, rotted through as they are. Yet even a mange-ridden old cur can draw blood if cornered too hastily. Better to trap it in a cage and starve it, then wring its neck once it no longer has the strength to resist."

"One can only hope that they go quietly into their cage."

"They will if they believe they do so by choice. They will never suspect that they dance to our tune, even as we lure them to their doom. The old order will crumble, and from its ruins new houses will rise, young and lean and hungry as this great nation must be."

Emperor Greiheit took a long sniff of his wine, then let the glass fall to the floor, sending glittering shards flying in all directions. A burgundy stain seeped into the plush carpet. The emperor's smile deepened as he watched it spread.

"I despise decadence."

Chancellor Graeci stooped to clear up the glass shards, but the emperor stopped him with a wave. “Throw it all away. More importantly, how do you gauge my newest son?”

“This man would know better than I, Your Majesty.”

The chancellor clapped his hands. A man in a traveler’s cloak appeared as if from nowhere behind him and fell to one knee.

“To speak honestly, Your Majesty,” the man said, “I fear I am not qualified to take his measure.”

Chancellor Graeci’s eyebrows twitched imperceptibly. Though this man wore the attire of a traveler, he was a prominent member of Vang, House Scharm’s private cadre of assassins. That he had failed at his task was surprising, to say the least.

“It is most unfortunate that you were so outmatched.” Graeci made no effort to hide his disappointment.

The man bowed his head in shame. “I can only apologize.”

Like all assassins of Vang—or “Death’s Head”—he had honed his skills tirelessly until he wavered on the brink of death, devoting his body and soul to perfecting his art. After a lifetime of devotion, he had at last proven himself worthy of a personal assignment from his master: the simple task of assessing one boy’s strength. For a man who had survived the ordeals he had, that should have been trivial.

“One moment he was there, the next he had a knife to one of my hired peasants’ backs. That is all I can say for certain.”

“That will do,” Chancellor Graeci said. “Take your ease. I will notify you later as regards your punishment.”

“My lord.” The assassin melted back into the shadows.

The chancellor breathed an exasperated sigh before turning to the emperor. He gave a shamefaced bow. “My apologies, Your Majesty. It appears I chose the wrong man.”

“Think nothing of it. I know enough of your Vang not to doubt their efficacy.”

The emperor closed his eyes and sighed. “Have them infiltrate Berg Fortress. This time, they will not fail.”

“As Your Majesty commands.”

With that, Chancellor Graeci turned around and left the Chamber of the Sovereign.

*

The next morning

A shaft of morning sunlight fell on Hiro’s face, rousing him from sleep. The sheets next to him were unoccupied. The mistress of the house must have already left on some errand.

Where am I supposed to freshen up?

He approached the door, intending to look for a washroom, but it opened from the other side. Rosa entered, exuding a palpable air of allure. She had somehow squeezed herself into a military uniform, although it was still noticeably tight around the chest.

Her face fell. “Oh, you’re awake.”

“Only just gotten up. Could I ask where the washroom—?”

“That can wait. You have a visitor.” Rosa jerked a thumb backward, her usual exuberance strangely cowed.

Hiro peered at her for a second, then glanced over her shoulder to see the long, bony face of Chancellor Graeci.

The elderly man inclined his head. “Forgive me for calling so early.”

Hiro looked at him quizzically. “What are you doing here?”

“I come bearing a letter from His Majesty the Emperor. I regret the inconvenience, but I deemed its importance too great to entrust to another.”

“A letter from His Majesty?”

“Indeed. I trust you understand that it is for your eyes only.”

The chancellor handed over the letter with a fleeting but pointed glance at

Rosa, then bowed and excused himself. As Hiro saw the man out, he became conscious of Rosa's gaze burning into the envelope.

"Interested?" he asked.

"Only if you decide you're willing to show me." She shrugged. The message was clear: *do as you like*. She set out along the corridor, but stopped almost immediately. "Meet me in the dining room once you're done," she said over her shoulder. "Breakfast will be waiting for you. And the well's in the courtyard if you want to freshen up."

With a goodbye wave, she turned the corner and was gone.

Hiro looked down at the letter in his hands, failing to suppress a yawn. He could more or less guess what it said.

Maybe I'll go look for that well, he thought.

The courtyard was easy enough to find. He walked up to the well and splashed some water onto his face only to realize that there was no towel nearby. He searched around, blinking through the water in his eyes, but there was not so much as a scrap of cloth.

I guess I'll dry off eventually.

Hiro accepted defeat and started trudging toward the dining room. Just then, something soft settled on his head. Reaching for it, he found that it was a white towel. He wiped his face dry, then looked around for whoever had given it to him.

"Thanks. I apprecia—"

His thanks caught in his throat before he could finish. There stood Aura, one hand on her hip, legs planted wide, scowling as furiously as he'd ever seen.

"The Black Prince, I see. Did you enjoy yourself last night?"

What she was doing here was only the first of Hiro's many questions, but one was more pressing than the rest.

"Who's 'the Black Prince'?"

"That's what they call you now."

“Who’s ‘they’?”

“The nobles who watched you take advantage of a vulnerable young widow last night.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me... Hold on, it was her who took me home, not the other way around!”

“Don’t worry. I made that up.”

Hiro let out a long breath. “Don’t do that. You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“They actually call you that because you seduced the Iron Countess.”

“The who?”

“Their name for Countess von Kelheit. For the way she takes any excuse to turn down her suitors.” Aura’s eyes narrowed in disdain. “After how quickly you talked your way into her bedchamber, it’s no surprise they’re whispering about you. Half the court wants to know the secrets of your silver tongue.”

“Argh, what have I done?”

Hiro clutched his head in his hands. He had expected his actions would set people talking, but he had never meant to make this great of a fuss, let alone provoke envy.

Aura stepped closer to look up at him with leaden gray eyes. “I warned you to be careful of women.”

“I’m sorry. I should have listened.”

“House Kelheit are the ones spreading the rumors. No other house would be so eager to inflate your reputation. If it were me, I’d be telling everyone I knew that you fell face-first into a scheming widow’s bodice. For example.”



“So would I, I suppose.”

“But she’s making sure to spread the story that flatters you. I’m impressed. With her, not you. What you did was idiotic.”

“I guess I deserve that.”

“Just don’t let your guard down again.” Aura breathed an exasperated sigh. She looked down at Hiro’s jacket. “What about the Black Camellia? Didn’t it try to protect your virtue?”

“I don’t think we’re on good terms right now.”

“The spirit inside, you mean.”

“Yeah. I’m sure she’d defend me if my life was actually in danger, but otherwise, I think I’m on my own.”

“A singular spirit.”

“You’re telling me,” Hiro sighed.

The Black Camellia had been much more agreeable a thousand years ago, although that had abruptly changed when Excalibur had bestowed him with its favor. Thereafter, she had developed a decidedly petulant streak.

And then I left her to gather dust for a thousand years.

In that sense, it was a miracle that she was allowing him to wear her at all—or at least, without tightening his collar about eight inches.

As he looked his uniform over, Aura noticed the letter in his hand.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“This? A letter from the emperor.”

“Haven’t you read it yet?”

“I figured I’d have a wash first. I wanted to wake myself up a bit. Besides, I can guess what it says.”

Aura nodded. “He’ll want you to join the attack on Lichtein.”

“The people will call him a coward if he doesn’t retaliate, and the nobles won’t be happy either. And at worst, all he stands to lose is a few other nations’

approval.”

Hiro opened the envelope and scanned the letter. The contents were more or less what he’d expected, although several points jumped out at him.

“Hmm,” he mused.

“As you expected?”

“Pretty much. He wants me to prove myself.”

“A suitable challenge for your first campaign.”

The Duchy of Lichtein had been teetering on the brink of collapse ever since their disastrous invasion several weeks prior. With fifteen thousand men sent over the border and nothing to show for it, Duke Lichtein’s standing was falling fast. The slightest show of force would send his nobles scrambling to surrender.

“It says the new commander of the Fourth Legion is General von Kilo. He’s leading a force of ten thousand over the border. Liz will be with them.”

The Fourth Legion’s original commander, High General von Loeing, had joined the first prince in house arrest for misconduct. Presumably, he had since been replaced.

“And you?” Aura asked.

“I’m meant to hurry south and meet up with them en route, where I’ll join the general’s advisors. I guess the emperor wants to see how I do helping finish the duchy off after they’ve already been softened up.”

“An easy enough role to play.”

“Should be. Then I suppose we’ll annex the north of Lichtein and leverage that into a peace deal.”

“Correct. Conquering the duchy would destroy the slave market.”

Hiro gave an exaggerated shrug. “I almost feel bad for them, knowing that’s the only reason we keep them around.”

He lowered his eyes to the letter once more. There was one more detail that intrigued him: the final line, which he had not discussed with Aura.

That must be why the chancellor said it was for my eyes only.

He couldn't imagine that Aura would tell anybody else, but the walls had ears here in the imperial palace. He folded the letter back into the envelope, taking care to let his expression give nothing away. Instead, he finally voiced the question that had been bothering him ever since Aura first made her appearance.

"So what are you doing here, anyway?"

She was Third Prince Brutahl's chief strategist. Her appearance at Countess von Kelheit's mansion risked starting all sorts of undesirable rumors.

"I know what you're thinking, and that won't happen."

"So you came here in secret?"

"I didn't need to."

Hiro cocked his head.

"It doesn't matter that I'm here," she explained. "You've brought the court to a standstill."

"You mean everyone's too busy gossiping about me?"

"In a sense. Say somebody tried to start a rumor that I'd defected to you. Everybody else would have to close ranks and deny it. Otherwise, the more nervous nobles might start flocking to House Kelheit."

Aura held a great deal of sway among the nobility. They regarded her stellar military career, capped off with an almost single-handed defeat of Faerzen, with admiration. To spread gossip about her risked starting a chain reaction among those who were waiting to see which way the wind was blowing.

"Things aren't like they were yesterday. Now, everything's uncertain. Nobody wants to risk stirring the pot." Aura paused. "Anyway. I'm here because I'm leaving shortly. I came to say goodbye."

"Are you heading back west?"

"I am. What's left of Faerzen's army isn't going quietly. The emperor wants me to quash the insurgency."

"I'd hoped you'd be able to show me around the capital, but I guess we're

both too busy.”

“I would have liked that. Another time, perhaps.” Aura dipped her head. “I’ll write,” she said, then turned around and walked away.

It would have been nice to say goodbye to von Spitz, but the man likely had his own preparations to attend to. Hiro was far from free either. He had to make for Berg Fortress with all haste. Resolving to meet up at a later date, he returned inside and asked a maid the way to the dining room. She directed him to a chamber with a large door, which the servant standing before it opened for him with a bow.

“Sorry about that,” he announced as he entered. “I took a little longer than I expected.”

“Not at all. Please.” Rosa gestured to the chair beside her. Once he was seated, she clapped her hands sharply. A procession of maids filed from a door in the western wall—presumably leading to the kitchens—and laid an array of dishes silently on the table.

Before picking up his knife and fork, Hiro turned to Rosa. “The emperor wants me to join the attack on Lichtein. I’ll be leaving after breakfast.”

“I thought you might.” Rosa nodded. “Well, the least I can do is give you a royal send-off.”

She did not look surprised. In fact, she seemed to have anticipated what he would say.

Hiro finished his breakfast and exited the mansion to find a great crowd of nobles waiting outside. As soon as they saw him, they fell to one knee in unison. Any onlooker would have been astonished to see so many worthies of the empire bowing their heads before one young boy, and indeed, the platoons of guards patrolling the palace estate looked on slack-jawed from afar.

Taking care not to let his confusion show, Hiro cast a glance at Rosa, who was standing beside him in her military uniform.

“I called on the eastern nobles who happened to be in the capital,” she explained. “Just a small affair, you understand.”

“This is small?”

She could not have summoned this many nobles on short notice. This had been planned. To mobilize this many people without raising the suspicions of the other houses was a stunning feat of intrigue. It must have taken an extraordinary amount of preparation.

Rosa laid a hand on an astounded Hiro’s shoulder. “Shall we be off, my dear Black Prince?”

Hiro winced at the moniker. It seemed Aura had not made that part up.

A luxurious carriage rolled up before them. One of the nobles stood. “Please, Your Highness,” he said as he opened the door for them.

Hiro climbed inside the carriage, took a seat on the sofa, and breathed a heavy sigh.

“Can I ask you something?”

His question could only have been directed at one person: Rosa, sat opposite him with her uniform bursting at the seams. She crossed her legs and cocked her head, her face impassive.

“Whatever you like.” She had a way of infusing every gesture with a polished grace. She had claimed to be the former third princess; that was clearly no lie.

“How long have you been planning all of this?” Within Hiro’s eyes gleamed an acuity that would brook no deception or misdirection.

Rosa gave him a guilty smile. “Since Liz sent her letter. I saw the opportunity right away. I could rid myself of those accursed suitors and rescue my house in one fell swoop.”

“And what if I had turned to be a pretender?”

“Then I had arranged for my house to resume its support for Liz.”

“What about finding a husband?”

“I would have taken in an orphan and passed them off as my late husband’s bastard child. As I told you before, I’m no loose woman.”

“It sounds like you have more reasons for siding with me than you told me

yesterday.”

Rosa sighed. “Was it that obvious?”

“More or less. You’d need better reasons than that to bet such careful plans on me.”

Hiro looked out the window to find the view transformed. The eastern nobles’ private forces had joined their carriage, no doubt on Rosa’s instructions. Every soldier’s armor was decorated with their liege’s heraldry, and the standards fluttering above them bore the same. One flag, however, stood out among the rest: Hiro’s own, with its dragon clutching a silver sword on a black field. Taking wing in the cloudless sky, it made for a striking sight.

Hiro returned his gaze to Rosa to find that her face had taken on a serious cast.

“Tell me,” she said. “When you look at the Grantzian Empire, what do you see?”

“A strong nation,” Hiro replied. “Although maybe stretched a little thin.”

“It’ll get thinner. His Majesty has his sights set on conquering all of Soleil.”

Hiro frowned. “The empire’s large enough already. If it gets any bigger, the emperor’s authority won’t reach its borders. It’s struggling enough as it is.”

Rosa nodded. “The last emperor—my grandfather—would have agreed with you. But the current one is intent on making himself the thirteenth Divine.”

“He wants to become a god?”

“History is made by human hands. Gods are no different. But even an emperor would have to accomplish a feat worthy of a deity for the people to accept him as one.”

“And he thinks the unification of Soleil will be that feat?”

“The first emperor became Zertheus, the First God, when he founded the empire. The second emperor became Mars, the War God, when he brought peace to the realm. All of our gods were once emperors who, in one way or another, made great contributions to our nation. With the exception of one goddess, of course, who never sat the throne.” Rosa paused. “And the current

emperor hopes to join their ranks by achieving the one thing they never could.”

“So what does that have to do with you supporting me?” Hiro asked.

“Nobody lives forever, not even an emperor. What if he dies before realizing his dream? The future would suddenly become very uncertain. It seems prudent to prepare, just in case.” Rosa spread her arms wide. “The empire has grown as large as it can. We can’t stretch ourselves any further. Any more land that we take, we’ll struggle to hold. Things will start to fray, and before we know it, we’ll find ourselves mired in civil war.”

She undid the top button of her uniform and seemed to breathe a little easier.

“Right now, what we need most of all is stability. A leader who will turn their gaze inward, not outward. My late husband hoped that Liz could be that leader. She was still immature, physically and mentally, but her heart was pure, and it showed her a clear vision for the empire’s future. Despite her failings, with the right advisors at her side, she would make a fine empress—or so he decided. And then he was murdered.”

She clenched her fist and lifted her gaze to the palace beyond the window.

“And as I sat by, watching all our efforts come undone, Liz’s enemies took advantage of my weakness to ship her off to a border province. A stupid mistake on my part. I can’t tell you how grateful I am to you for saving her in her hour of need. When I read her letter, I cried with joy. And at the same time, I realized I could use you.”

“To seat Liz on the throne,” Hiro said.

“For what it’s worth, I do feel bad about it.”

“Not at all. Honestly, it suits me just fine.”

Hiro had never nursed any ambitions of becoming emperor. Aside from anything else, he might return to Earth at any time. To claim the throne himself would risk inviting chaos.

Rosa gave a wry smile. “Well. Emperors, too, are made by human hands, whether they like it or not.” She leveled a pale finger at Hiro. “You ought to bear that in mind. It might be important someday.”

At that moment, the carriage window rattled. Rosa's eyes widened. She turned to see crowds of commonfolk standing outside, smiling and waving. Cries and cheers—"It's the Black Prince!"—filled the air.

A wall of people lined both sides of the central boulevard. Flower petals danced in the breeze. Even the hawkers and merchants had abandoned their stalls to come running. The people scrambled over one another to catch a glimpse of Hiro, jumping and jostling, waving their hands and shouting to catch his attention.

"I'm always astonished to see how the people love the War God," Rosa said. "And they seem to love his heir just as much."

There was a hint of pride in her voice, but Hiro's mind was elsewhere, despairing that his "Black Prince" moniker had already proliferated through the city.

There's no way... Rosa must have planted people. Still, once one person starts calling the name, everyone around them will pick it up.

Indeed, before long, the crowd had struck up a chant. Their cheers rang pleasantly in his ears. Some things never changed, even after a thousand years.

"A flattering sight, I'm sure. Just don't let it go to your head." Rosa leaned forward, her face grave. "So, what happens now?"

Hiro thought for a moment. "I'll return to Linkus, then join the attack on Lichtein."

"Worried about how Liz is doing?"

"That too, but there's something else I want to make certain of."

"Then take the eastern road. I doubt you can hire any soldiers of your own yet, but I could lend you an escort, if you'd like."

Hiro might now be royalty, but as yet, he owned no land that could generate income. He might receive some in the future, if he earned it, but until then he would have to survive on his tribune's wages, and his first pay had not yet come. Besides, he could not possibly fund a private armed force on a third class tribune's salary. Chancellor Graeci would likely be willing to lend him funds

from the national coffers, but he balked at the idea of indebting himself. In the end, he decided it would be prudent to accept Rosa's—and House Kelheit's—assistance.

"I don't need an escort," he said, "but I'd appreciate it if you could arrange a stagecoach."

"The east is relatively peaceful," Rosa said, "but there's always the danger of running into brigands or monsters on the road. If money is your concern, I'll happily foot the bill."

"An escort would only slow me down. I want to catch up to Liz as quickly as possible."

"I'm not changing your mind, am I? Very well, I'll prepare our fastest stagecoach. I'll see that you have some coin to tide you over too. I don't doubt that you'll find a use for it."

"Thank you. I won't forget this."

"Think nothing of it. You've already more than paid me back. More to the point, what do you intend to do next?"

She was talking about after the attack on Lichtein was over, Hiro knew. "I'll assemble people I can trust and solidify my position."

Rosa hummed. "I see. Well, if ever you're strapped for gold or men, I'll be pleased to lend my assistance."

She offered her hand. With a soft smile, Hiro shook it.

"For better or for worse, I cast my lot with yours. Don't go dying on me, now, will you?"

Hiro nodded, then ventured a question. "To change the subject—what are your thoughts on the attack on Lichtein?"

Rosa pursed her lips. "It won't challenge you much, I think."

Hiro sighed. *Of course*. No doubt anyone else would say the same.

"Given how you fared against fifteen thousand, I don't think anybody expects anything less."

“True.”

“But that’s all the more reason not to get cocky. If the invasion goes anything less than smoothly, it’ll become an albatross around your neck.”

She had given voice to his own thoughts. There were few things more dangerous than the promise of an easy battle. It made commanders careless, and careless commanders made mistakes. Hiro had seen it happen many times.

All the more reason to be cautious.

His mind flew to happenings far beyond the horizon. The Grantzian Empire could not afford to get bogged down in a prolonged invasion. Its enemies were many, and they were always looking for an opportunity to strike.

His time was limited and his options were few. As an idea crystallized in his mind, he turned to Rosa.

“There’s something I’d like you to do for me,” he said.

And he set in motion a plan to ensure victory.

Chapter 3: A Storm in the South

The Golden Hall rose high over Azbakal, the capital city of the Duchy of Lichtein. In normal times, it stood proud as a symbol of the duke's authority. Now, it was anything but. Nobles dashed about its halls in a panic or stood in dark corners whispering their disapproval of the ducal family.

Not one month past, Duke Lichtein had lost both his first and third sons to a disastrous incursion into the Grantzian Empire. What was more, a zlostas had appeared in the south, cobbled together a rebel army of freedmen and sellswords with a former slave girl as their figurehead, and sent them to rampage as they pleased under the pretext of freeing their fellow slaves. Frustrated by his court's lack of initiative in quelling the rebellion, Duke Lichtein himself had ridden forth with two thousand camel riders, one thousand infantry, and one thousand slaves. That had been four days ago. Now, the nobles of the land gathered anxiously in the throne room of the masterless Golden Hall. The time was drawing nigh for news to arrive from the battlefield.

At last, a messenger stumbled through the doors. "I bring word from the field!" he cried. "His Highness and the ducal army have fallen to the rebels!"

A wave of cries and groans passed through the chamber. The nobles had never seriously considered the possibility of defeat.

One man stepped out from the throng and approached the messenger. He shook his head in disbelief, his face drawn. "Surely you lie. This cannot be!"

His incredulity was understandable. The rebel army making trouble in the south numbered fewer than two thousand, while the duke's forces had comprised his most elite troops. Although the ducal army's defeat several weeks past had taken a heavy toll on morale, the duke's personal leadership should have compensated for that well enough. His high nobles were all veteran warriors; with them at his side, the army should have run like clockwork.

"How did this tragedy come to pass?" the nobleman asked.

“The slaves turned against their masters and slew the high nobles to a man,” the messenger replied. “His Highness fought valiantly, but he perished on the field!”

“The slaves... Curse their treacherous bones!”

The nobleman stumbled away from the messenger, fell to his knees, and pressed his forehead to the floor. He began to shudder with sobs. Several in the crowd swooned. Some nobles began to mutter that the nation was finished, while others privately began plotting to flee across the border. Yet where all believed that the fall of the duchy was certain, one man stepped forward to quell their despair.

“Calm yourselves. Now is not the time for weeping and wailing. Now is the time to plan for the future. We cannot suffer this rebel army to run roughshod over our lands.”

The nobles’ eyes converged on the figure who had entered the chamber. The young man hesitated for a moment beneath their disdainful glares but resumed his progress along the red carpet. With his wan features and willowy frame, he looked as though he might collapse at any moment. This was Duke Lichtein’s second son, Karl Oruk Lichtein, the sickly child of the ducal family whom all had hoped would never succeed his father. He held the rank of count.

As he reached the center of the throng, Karl gestured back toward the doors with a pasty arm.

“Our savior has returned in our hour of need.”

Another man strode in with a haughty swagger: Marquis Rankeel, sentinel of the northwestern border. He glowered at the nobles as they shrank away. Now approaching his thirty-fourth year, the man had made himself a national hero two years prior by repelling thirty thousand troops from the neighboring Republic of Steissen. For all his talent, however, his disdainful demeanor had won him no love from those in power, and he had found himself assigned to guard the border, far away from the capital.

“I lament His Highness’s passing as sorely as the rest of you,” Rankeel declared, “but this is no time to mourn. Count Karl Lichtein, it must fall to you to become our new duke.”

Angry whispers arose from the crowd. How dare this man appear uninvited and presume to decide the future of the duchy?

“Who do you think you are to dictate who rules us?! Lord Karl is too frail to lead a nation—”

“And his predecessor was more qualified? Bah. I have no wish to speak ill of the dead, but the duke cared more for his own pockets than his people. When his judgment was required, he looked to his high nobles before the law. His first son was a headstrong fool who let his enemies run rings around him, and his third was remarkable only for his mediocrity.”

A nobleman stepped forward to accost Rankeel, his face flushed red with anger. “Show some respect, you reprobate!”

The marquis barked with laughter. “I speak only the truth. Unlike the rest of you, who still pretend that you do not rejoice at his death!”

“What is this accusation?!”

“You know very well what I accuse you of. Or would you prefer that I said it aloud?”

Most of the high nobles, the source of the duchy’s decline, had ridden forth with the duke and perished by his side. Now that they were gone, the men and women in this room could take their place.

If I permit them, Rankeel thought. Which I will not.

The time had come to set his nation to rights. Even if the duke had survived the battle, the country would still have been destined to perish in internecine strife. This reckoning had been a long time coming, as much as the nobility had fought to suppress it. The birth of the rebel army had been, in a sense, inevitable.

But to think the rebels would upend things so quickly...

The duke’s first and third sons had ridden to their doom in pursuit of glory, and now the duke himself had perished in battle. Rankeel would have personally thanked every rebel soldier for their service if he could.

“Still, there is hope,” Rankeel continued. “The man still leaves us his most

talented son—Karl Oruk Lichtein, a man who cares for the people, esteems the military, and loves those who serve him.”

“Yet it is as he says,” Karl admitted. “I am frail of body and know not when I may die. Can I truly be the one to steer the duchy?” The strength of his will shone through his words.

Smiling, Rankeel gave a resolute nod. “I am no doctor, but I can say this: no man knows when his end will come. Indeed, it seems to me that in these times, it is the healthy who die young.”

Karl laughed despite the gibe—the duke, a man of robust health, and his firstborn son had died, while his sickly second son yet lived. “As you say, then. It would be an honor to serve as duke, at least until my life is spent. Yet I only worry, will the people accept me as their ruler?”

“Once you break the rebel army that slew your father, they will welcome you with open arms.”

“Then once I have vanquished these rebels, I will take my place as duke.”

“He’s a strong will, this one,” murmured Rankeel. With a nod of approval, he turned to regard the rest of the nobles. “It seems Lord Karl’s heart is set. Will the rest of you follow?”

“If Lord Karl has made his decision, we will obey,” a nobleman piped up. “But how do you propose to vanquish an army that has defeated our best men?”

Rankeel scoffed to himself. They could no longer even think for themselves, these nobles. How deep the rot had burrowed.

How I’d love to cut them down where they stand, but they still have their uses. First, I’ll squeeze them for every last drop of their ill-gotten wealth.

He gave a theatrical shrug. “Where is it written that we must face them in open combat?”

“What do you propose, Marquis?” Karl asked.

“Wait a while, and you shall see,” was Rankeel’s only reply.

In short order, another man burst into the throne room. “I bear urgent news!” he cried. “The Fourth Legion is gathering at Berg Fortress! It appears they are

preparing to invade!”

This was what Marquis Rankeel had been waiting for. In that moment, he knew that his victory was assured. This was a man whose formidable strategic mind even other nations believed was wasted on his homeland. Though the late duke had feared his talents too much to make use of them, here he had a second chance to put them to the proof. He could not help but grin.

The nobles, however, were of a different mind. They saw no opportunity, only the conquering lion of Soleil bearing down on them. A ripple of disquiet ran through the throne room. As the air filled with fear, Marquis Rankeel moved to restore order.

“Do not despair!” he cried. “I have a plan!”

He was well practiced at manipulating hearts and minds. If any seasoned nobles had been present, they may have raised their voices against him, but they had all perished with their duke. All that remained were those too hesitant to commit to any course of action. They were terrified of losing their station and, moreover, their lives. While they had earlier looked down their noses at Rankeel, now they had no choice but to follow him.

“Lord Karl, why face the rebel army ourselves when the Fourth Legion may do it for us?”

“So you mean to set one against the other?”

“Precisely. It will be no difficult task. Our longtime spies in the empire inform us that it is Von Loeing’s Shadow that leads the Fourth Legion. Now that the man himself is disgraced, they have sent a dullard to take his place. I shall have this general dancing in the palm of my hand.”

Rankeel rifled through his pockets and produced a piece of paper—a map of Lichtein, which he unfurled on the red carpet.

“First, I would ask you to summon your soldiers from their forts and town garrisons. We must have an army or all will be for naught.”

As one, the nobles surged out of the throne room, desperate to recall their forces from their lands. They had learned from the high nobles how to ingratiate themselves with power. Those who moved quickly in times of crisis

would reap the greatest rewards, while laggards would settle for less. Frantic to win Karl's favor, they pushed and shoved amongst themselves to be first through the doors. Those with no soldiers to hand, or those who hesitated to commit them to the new duke, would hurl their wealth at the matter instead. In the space of moments, the chamber was empty but for two men and their guards.

"Now that those fools are gone, we must discuss our plans for victory." Marquis Rankeel's eyes shone with a piercing gleam. "What I say must not leave this chamber. Is that understood?"

Karl nodded.

"First," the marquis continued, "I mean to lead the Fourth Legion into combat with the rebel army."

Karl frowned. "Will they be so easily led?"

"They will if we pave the way. We will lessen our forts' defenses and create a path of least resistance, luring them deep into our lands. Von Loeing's Shadow is starved for recognition. He will gladly take the bait."

Rankeel spoke with unwavering confidence, but Karl did not seem reassured.

"I am not convinced things will go so smoothly. Will a general of the empire not be astute enough to see through our intentions?"

"There are no limits to human greed. With a delicious morsel dangling before their eyes, anyone will bite. We must simply make him believe that his success is his own doing. A rampaging lion is a menace, but a baited lion is easily controlled."

Karl nodded in understanding.

"And then," Rankeel continued, "once their battle is done, we will fall upon the exhausted victor."

"I see. We play them against one another, and in the end, we profit."

"Up to that point, I have little doubt that my plan will succeed. Victory in the final battle, however, will come down to our soldiers...although there is one more factor that may upset the balance."

“And what is that?”

“I’ve heard tell that the Republic of Steissen and the Grand Duchy of Draal have reached a peace accord. One motivated in part by the fall of Faerzen, I don’t doubt, but mostly brought on by the death of Steissen’s head of state.”

“I see. A problem indeed,” Karl said.

“The republic is struggling to hold itself together. I fear that some may take advantage of the turmoil to turn their eyes on us.”

Lichtein’s two successive defeats had greatly depleted their armed forces. Outside of critical locations, their defenses were spread dangerously thin.

“The rebel army, the empire, and now Steissen...” Karl mused. “For all that the world derides us as a slave nation, it seems unable to leave us alone.”

The Duchy of Lichtein was a dry and inhospitable land, but many had lusted to conquer it since time immemorial. The reason was simple: the myriad pristine oases dotting the Zigur Desert. While their human occupants rendered them unwelcoming to spirits, without those occupants, they would make the perfect environment for spirits to gather. In other words, any nation that could seize the oases would obtain a ready supply of spirit stones. Yet one could not simply stroll in and take them. With the Grantzian Empire’s investment in Lichtein’s slave trade, any would-be conqueror of Lichtein could be certain of swift and sure reprisal from the greatest power on the continent—or at least, they would have been until the previous month, when relations between Lichtein and the empire had soured. Now the duchy was vulnerable.

“All the more reason we must bring this conflict to a swift end,” Rankeel replied.

As time passed, settlements would fall prey to bandits and monsters. Discontent would fester among the people. If it reached a boiling point, they would find themselves contending with a second or even a third rebel army. At that stage, it would be a trial simply to keep the nation together. Ravaged by outsiders as it crumbled from within, the Duchy of Lichtein would soon vanish from the map. The only way to avoid that fate was to end this war before it could come to pass.

“And you are capable of this?”

“I am, my lord. I ask only that you entrust this matter to me.”

Karl thought for a moment, then answered. “Very well.”

Though Rankeel’s confident tone was enough to comfort Karl, the marquis himself was privately less assured. *I have a trying task ahead of me*, he thought.

The duchy could muster five thousand men at best. That was fewer than half of the Fourth Legion’s numbers. It was fewer even than the rebel army could boast, now that the latter’s conquests had swelled its ranks.

“Yet come what may, victory shall be mine.”

He fought now for his motherland. He would see it endure, no matter the cost.

With resolve stirring in his breast, Marquis Rankeel began to scheme.

*

The twenty-third day of the seventh month of Imperial Year 1023

The hour was early, long before the morning mist had cleared. A clamor rose into the air, the clattering of armor and the whinnying of countless horses. Before the main gate of Berg Fortress, cavalry and infantry lined up in staggering numbers. Every soldier radiated eagerness. Their faces bore fierce expressions born of a mix of elation and anticipation.

The force numbered ten thousand, fully half of the twenty-thousand-strong Fourth Legion charged with protecting the south. Commanding the two thousand who made up the left flank was Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz, sixth princess of the empire and wielder of Lævateinn.

“Is General von Kilo a capable general? I haven’t heard much about him.”

The princess spoke to the doughty old soldier by her side, Tris von Tarmier.

“I’m not surprised, Your Highness. His accomplishments don’t exactly ring all the way to the capital. He’s had the misfortune of spending every battle overshadowed by a greater man, never to enjoy his own moment in the sun.”

“Do you mean High General von Loeing?”

“Aye, so I do. On account of von Loeing taking all the glory, von Kilo’s never had the chance to win any real recognition of his own. He’s climbed his way up the ranks over the years, winning small accolades here and there, but even now they call him Von Loeing’s Shadow.”

“How unfortunate... Still, he must be a capable commander, if he’s had to work for everything he has.”

Tris gave a nonplussed grunt. “Well, I wonder about that.”

“What do you mean?” Liz asked.

“I hear, Your Highness, that a life spent overshadowed by talent has left him resentful of those who have it.”

“So he values hard work over natural ability?”

“Put charitably, aye. Or, less charitably, you might say he likes to be the cleverest one in the room.”

“That hasn’t caused any problems so far. Why should we worry now?”

“A general who shuns talent narrows his options. That’s what happens when you never listen to anyone cleverer than yourself. You get predictable.” Tris leveled a concerned gaze at Liz. “Besides, Your Highness, I fear you’re forgetting something.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re exactly the sort of prodigy the man despises. That’s what’s worrying this old head of mine the most.”

Liz laughed. “Me? Don’t be silly. If I was that talented, I wouldn’t have to train so hard.” She waved her hands in front of her face to deny it, but there was no concealing her grin.

Tris breathed a deep sigh and gestured to the Spiritblade on Liz’s hip. “What is that, Your Highness?”

“Why, Lævateinn, of course. Isn’t she lovely?”

“That’s not the question, Your Highness. How many Spiritblades are there in the world?”

“Five. Well, counting the lost one. Four, really.”

“Aye, that’s my point. Four Spiritblades in all of Aletia, and you wear one of them on your belt.”

Liz’s eyes widened in confusion. “But...it just chose me. Owning it doesn’t make me some kind of prodigy.”

“Doesn’t it? It chose you for a reason, Your Highness. You’ve some kind of talent, to be sure, even if you yourself aren’t aware of it yet. That’ll be more than enough to earn the general’s displeasure.”

“He’s the commander of an army, not a child. I’m sure he wouldn’t be so petty.”

“Aye, I hope not, but still, watch yourself around him. There’s no harm in being cautious.”

“All right.” Liz made note of the warning.

I remember Hiro saying something similar.

Her thoughts turned to the black-haired boy with the eyepatch obscuring his face. He had been gone for ten days now, but two days before his departure, she had gone to visit him in Berg Fortress’s study. He had been cooped up there, so immersed in his books that he hadn’t even come down for breakfast.

“Liz,” he asked the moment she entered the room, “what do you need to wage war?”

The sudden question knocked her off-balance. “Um...troops, supplies, and...erm...oh, that’s right! Reliable intelligence!”

“All good answers, but they only apply once the war has begun. First of all, you need a cause or you can’t even start. Remember that.” He turned to her with a wry smile. “But we can talk about that later. First, let’s discuss gathering intelligence...”

Before she knew it, his face had lost all of its usual youthfulness. That expression again... she thought.

This boy wore several faces. His usual one was as meek and timid as anyone

else his age, but on the battlefield it changed into a cold, unreadable mask. His final face was this one, the self-assured expression he wore when he was devising some stratagem. She wondered which was the real Hiro, and hoped it was the first.

“...so it’s best to have your agents lie low for years or even decades before you anticipate needing them. That way, you’ll have a wealth of information to reference when you start making plans for war.”

Hiro snapped his book shut.

“So, you’ve proclaimed a suitable cause and gained the support of the people. You’ve trained your soldiers well and their morale is high. You have ample supplies and reliable intelligence on your enemy. All that’s left is to declare war.” He paused. “But even with all those things, you can still lose if you fail to act appropriately on your information.”

“Isn’t that what our advisors are for?” Liz asked.

“The best commanders let their advisors contradict them. That’s an admirable quality, I think. It shows that you know your limits. Don’t forget, though, not everyone is like that. Some commanders surround themselves with lesser advisors and shun anyone more talented.”

It was a timeless truth that many commanders wore a title too grand for them. Many such officers grew to resent those with the ability that they lacked. The result was that budding talent, unless it happened to be blessed with a wise superior, was all too often pruned before it could flourish. Liz, fortunate enough to be born to the royal bloodline and chosen by Lævateinn despite her sex, was the epitome of the natural ability such people despised.

“As a major general, sometimes you’ll be in charge yourself, but you’ll also often be assigned to advise other commanders. If that happens, remember: no matter how wrong they are, never contradict them publicly. Wound someone’s ego and they’ll find all kinds of ways to make your life difficult.”

“If they’re about to make a mistake, wouldn’t it be worse not to point it out?”

“That’s why you make plans in advance. So you can respond to any

eventuality. Reach out to the other officers. Make sure that you know them and they know you."

"Why would they care what I have to say?"

"You're the sixth princess of the empire. Use it. Well, you're also Lævateinn's chosen, so they might not welcome your letters quite so warmly, but... Well." Hiro spread his hands wide. His black eyes sparkled. "If Lævateinn's chosen gives an order, the soldiers will listen, no matter what. That will be useful when the time comes."

"When what time comes?" Liz asked, but Hiro only smiled.

"Now," he said. "About causes..."

He had kept talking until the sun went down, Liz remembered. She felt a headache coming on just thinking about it and shook her head to clear it.

"Tris," she said, her gaze aimed straight ahead.

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"I want you to find out the names of every squadron, platoon, battalion, and brigade commander."

Tris's brow knotted in puzzlement. She should already have known the names of all the officers under her command. He thought to himself for a moment, then his eyes widened. He looked back at Liz. "You can't mean for the entire army?"

"Of course. I want to be prepared in case General von Kilo starts leading us astray." With any luck, it would prove a wasted effort, but anything could happen on a battlefield. "Can I trust you with that, Tris?"

"I'll see it done immediately, Your Highness." Tris bowed his head, then turned his horse about and vanished into the sea of soldiers.

Liz watched him go. As her fingers settled around the hilt of her Spiritblade, several drums resounded as one from the heart of the army, sending a *boom* rolling through the ranks. A host of standards rose from the main force. Liz raised a hand, signaling to her own standard-bearer. Her banners unfurled with

the rest: a lily on a crimson field and, beside it, the lion on gold of the Grantzian royal family.

With that, the Fourth Legion began its march into the Duchy of Lichtein.

*

The twenty-sixth day of the seventh month of Imperial Year 1023, three days after Liz's departure with the Fourth Legion

"Welcome back. I've been waiting for you."

Hiro returned to Linkus to find Margrave Kiork awaiting him in front of his mansion, sporting an amiable smile. Beside him was Hiro's swiftdrake, looking none too happy to have been woken at the crack of dawn.

"This early?"

Hiro's surprise was well justified. The sun had only risen within the hour. In the first place, he hadn't even told Kiork when he expected to return. He began to worry about how long the man had been waiting, but Kiork dismissed his concerns with a shake of his head.

"It's the least honor I could show a member of the royal family. I did send someone to receive you at the station, but you must have missed one another."

"I appreciate it." Hiro looked down, humbled.

Kiork only smiled, with the tiniest hint of awkwardness. He reached into his pocket and produced a letter—the very same one that Hiro had sent via one of House Kelheit's messengers.

"I have done as you requested. I only wonder if this will suffice."

"No, it's more than enough. Thank you again."

"Please don't bow so. You are a prince now. You ought to be demanding *my* gratitude for the honor of doing your bidding."

"I couldn't possibly..." The very idea made Hiro cringe.

Kiork nodded in understanding, then gave Hiro a clap on the shoulder. *And you mustn't change*, the gesture seemed to say. Hiro flinched away slightly, a little put off by the man's unusual forwardness.

Kiork withdrew, rubbing the back of his head apologetically. “My apologies. I’ll admit, a night without sleep has me strangely giddy. Mostly, though, I’m just delighted that your claim was accepted. Perhaps I was overly familiar. I suppose I ought to treat royalty with more respect, or I might find myself a head shorter one of these days.”

So he hadn’t slept after all. Hiro felt a little guilty. There was no reason to take offense at a simple pat on the shoulder. He would not have accepted the gesture from Stovell, but Kiork was a good man, and besides, his tiredness was likely Hiro’s fault.

Before silence could set in, Hiro decided to change the topic.

“Has Liz left yet?” he asked.

“She has. I received word from her the day before yesterday. I don’t doubt that they are advancing through Lichtein as we speak.”

“In that case, I should be going.”

Hiro made to mount the swiftdrake, but Kiork hurriedly motioned him to wait.

“Surely you can’t mean to leave without breakfast?”

“I do. There’s something I need to investigate.”

More specifically, he wanted to look into one of the points mentioned in the emperor’s letter: the appearance of a zlosta. Centuries of interbreeding with the other peoples had thinned the blood of the zlosta that remained on Soleil, but Hiro doubted the emperor would have written for anything less than a pureblood. He had fought the fiendkin before, a thousand years ago. Firsthand experience had taught him just how powerful they could be.

Liz can probably deal with a lesser zlosta herself, but one with a manastone...that could be bad.

Within all zlosta dwelled a mysterious power known as mana. Some possessed only a trickle, but others harbored tremendous reservoirs. One could tell the difference by the presence or absence of crystals on their bodies. These crystals, formed from excess mana that solidified externally, possessed similar properties to spirit stones and so were known as manastones. If Liz found

herself pitted against one of those, the situation could turn very dangerous very fast.

Kiork could not possibly have guessed Hiro's thoughts, but he offered a wry smile anyway. "At least buy yourself some food and water in town. You can eat on the road—"

He began to rifle through his pockets, but Hiro cut him short.

"I'll be fine. I have provisions in here," he said, twisting around to show the hempen bag on his back.

"I see," Kiork said. "Very well, then, I won't keep you. I await news of your success."

"I'll be back soon," Hiro assured him.

He said farewell to Kiork, mounted the swiftdrake, and gave a tug on the reins. The reptilian creature reared and began to run with long, powerful strokes. Before long, the margrave's mansion was out of sight. There was only the strong headwind pressing against his face, sending his black garb fluttering behind him.

*

After crossing the border, the Fourth Legion had advanced through Lichtein with astonishing speed. Faced with only light resistance, they had begun capturing forts before half a day was done. They were currently pausing to rest their troops and horses a mere twelve sel from the capital city of Azbakal. Two more forts had fallen to their advance since that morning. In the main encampment, a strategy meeting was taking place to determine their next move.

The commander's tent was simple, little more than a table surrounded by four canvas walls. General von Kilo sat at the head with Liz to his right. The air weighed heavy with tension as an advisor raised a hand.

"May I proceed to the next item?"

"As you please," the general grunted.

With permission granted, the advisor stood, holding a report from the

reconnaissance division.

“An army of rebels has appeared in southern Lichtein. It is currently advancing north, toward our position. If nothing is done, conflict will become unavoidable. How should we proceed, sir?”

General von Kilo snorted in distaste. He turned a lazy gaze to the map laid out on the table and to the pawns atop it. “How many are they?” he asked.

“We estimate four thousand, sir, but they are growing. After routing the ducal forces, they have begun swelling their ranks with sellswords and freedmen. By the time they encounter us, their numbers will likely exceed six thousand.”

“Hmm. And what is the duchy up to?”

“Our informants report that they are gathering all the forces they can muster in the capital. That corroborates the intelligence we have received from our agents. By all accounts, they appear to be readying for a siege.”

“Like a tortoise retreating into its shell,” von Kilo scoffed. “I’d thought they’d have more courage. Still, the game is up.” He gestured vaguely toward the map. “First, we break this rebel army, then we add its numbers to our own. Only the sellswords, of course. The slaves we behead. Then we sack the capital and return home in triumph.”

No objections were forthcoming. The general nodded to himself in satisfaction. Only then did he notice that Liz was staring at the map with an expression of concern.

“Do you find some fault with my plan, Your Highness?”

“We’ve been keeping up a forced march all the way from the border,” she said. “The troops are exhausted.”

Sparsely defended as they were, the forts in their way had fallen without much of a fight. The Fourth Legion had swept south with astonishing speed, spurred on by their victories. Everything was going smoothly—surprisingly so. Morale was high. Still, sparse resistance was not no resistance. The battles had taken their toll, and they had more yet to come. Whether they intended to rout the rebels or take the capital next, the soldiers first needed respite. The consequences of fighting on days of pent-up exhaustion did not bear thinking

about.

“If we don’t have time to rest,” Liz continued, “we should stick to our original plans. Veer north and take the oasis city of Brueno, then use it to negotiate.”

“Your Highness, you appear to be laboring under a misapprehension.”

The note of condescension in General von Kilo’s voice did not escape Liz’s notice, but she forced herself to listen.

“You cannot judge the soldiers of the Fourth Legion by the standards of other men. They have trained extensively to cultivate their endurance for this very scenario. A mere forced march will not tire them.”

“They’re still only human,” Liz protested. “They can’t keep fighting forever.”

“They will only have to fight twice more: once to break the rebels, and once to take the capital. Then we will win fully half of Lichtein, not some paltry northern territory.”

“His Majesty doesn’t want you to destroy the duchy.”

“A nation does not fall merely because its capital does. We will leave them the south. The slave ships will need somewhere to dock.”

“Then the Fourth Legion will be stuck here indefinitely. We’ll end up spread too thin across our southern border. What if Steissen decides to take advantage of that? And in the meantime, the rest of Lichtein will be desperate to retake the capital. If order breaks down in the south, it’ll be a bloodbath.”

“Then we will simply crush the duchy once and for all and be done with it.” General von Kilo’s mouth curled into a grin as he turned to Liz. “You appear to be tired, Your Highness. It has you spouting all manner of cowardly nonsense. This meeting is done. You may return to your command...or, if you wish, to the rear, where you may await further orders.”

Liz clenched her fists and bit her tongue, but she could not keep her anger from showing on her face. Kigui, General von Kilo’s vice-commander, shot her a disapproving glance.

“You are not a princess here, Your Highness, merely an advisor. Your lack of self-control is unbecoming. I would ask you to refrain from any outbursts that

might embarrass His Majesty.”

“Leave her, Kigui,” von Kilo interjected. “Her Highness is young in years and inexperienced in military matters. She cannot be expected to be familiar with military etiquette. She will learn in time.” He turned the question to the room. “Is that not so?”

The rest of his advisors nodded as one.

“Fear not, Your Highness, I will ensure you have the chance to prove yourself.” With a slight smile, the general returned his eyes to the map. Evidently, their conversation was over.

“I’ll take you up on your offer, then,” Liz said. “Please excuse me.”

Arguing the point would only worsen her standing. The rest of the advisors cared only for telling von Kilo what he wanted to hear. She stood up and stalked out of the tent.

Tris approached her on horseback, leading her horse by the reins. “Is the meeting over, Your Highness?” he asked.

Liz scowled. “General von Kilo can’t see past the end of his nose.” She mounted up and turned her horse toward her own encampment.

“So his mind won’t be changed?”

“Apparently not. He means to defeat the rebels, then take Azbakal.”

“Well, he’s making no secret of his ambition. Strange. I had him pinned for a more cautious man.”

“So did I,” Liz sighed. “How are our preparations going?”

“I’d say three in five would take your corner.”

“I see. I’ll get to writing more letters.”

As Liz arrived back at her camp, she turned her eyes to the sky. The wind had picked up, whipping the desert sands into a haze of dust that made it hard to see.

“Strange,” she murmured to herself. “Why’s the wind so strong?”

Sudden squalls were one thing, but this continuous gale was unnatural. She

had never seen anything like it since crossing the border. As she knotted her brow in thought, she realized that Lævateinn was thrumming on her hip.

“Do you...sense something?”

“Your Highness?” Tris asked, alarmed. “Is something wrong?”

Liz ignored him. She narrowed her eyes, peering into the storm. All at once, the wind dropped. As the sand cleared, she found herself staring at ranks upon ranks of camel riders.

“Impossible!” Tris spluttered. “How did they get so close?! Are our sentries blind?!”

The old soldier stared in shock. A wave of alarm passed through the troops around them at the sight of the enemy.

Only Liz was calm. “Pull yourselves together!” she shouted, drawing Lævateinn. “Form into ranks! Sound the horn and warn the main camp! Tris, how quickly can we deploy?”

“The first cavalry are ready, Your Highness! The second will take a little longer!”

“Fine! Send the first to the fore!” Liz drove her heels into her horse’s flank, sending it surging forward.

“Your Highness!” Tris called after her, startled. “Where do you think you’re going?!”

“I’ll hold them off! You get the men ready!”

Liz wove through the ranks of cavalry and out into the desert. She brought her mount to a stop a short distance ahead of the front line. Before her, an enormous dust cloud loomed, rolling toward her like a wave. It was perhaps ninety rue distant—or two hundred and seventy meters—and closing.

As the camel riders bore down on Liz, her grip tightened around Lævateinn’s hilt. “No holding back,” she cried as they passed within thirty-seven rue. “Burn them to ashes!”

A gout of flame spewed from her Spiritblade’s tip, scorching the air with a blast of dry heat. The fire quickly spread. Within moments, it had formed a

burning wall between the two armies. A cheer went up from behind Liz at the otherworldly spectacle.

“They’ll split around the fire!” She turned her horse about and made for the first cavalry’s front line. “Their formation is broken! Now’s our chance! First cavalry, with me!”

“Your Highness!” Tris approached on horseback.

“What is it?”

“The second cavalry is ready for battle!”

“Good! Tell them to flank the enemy! While you’re at it, send word to the main camp to have the reserves circle around behind! We’ll surround them and finish them off!”

“At once, Your Highness!” Tris inclined his head. “May the Twelve Divines keep you!”

“And you! First cavalry, forwa—”

Liz’s command caught in her throat as she turned back toward the field. There, an impossible sight was unfolding. The wave of sand was encroaching on her wall of flame.

“What? But how?!”

As she watched, aghast, the fiery barrier vanished into the maw of the churning sands. Out from the arcing plumes of dust surged a wave of camel riders.

The sight of the enemy brought Liz back to her senses. She raised *Lævateinn* high, then leveled it at the approaching troops.

“Break their momentum!” she shouted. “First cavalry, charge!”

She yanked on the reins and drove her heels into her mount’s flanks. As she darted ahead, a great cry went up from behind her—“After Her Highness!”—and one thousand horsemen moved in her wake.

Liz collided with the enemy vanguard. She ducked low to avoid a spear, then, as it skimmed over her head, laid its wielder open with a swing of her sword.

The man toppled from his camel with a gurgle, blood spraying from his wound. Liz spared him only a single glance, then raised Lævateinn and launched a fireball from its blade. The orb burst, setting the field in front of her awash with flame. Screams rose from the enemy as fire consumed them. Those who failed to escape the blast toppled from their camels, covered in hideous burns and emitting a charred stench. Horseshoes crushed the dead underhoof, covering the battlefield with a mist of gore.

“Their lines are broken!” Liz cried. “Crush them now! Don’t give them a chance to regroup!”

The riderless camels began to panic, driven into a frenzy by the blast wave. As the enemy ranks dissolved into confusion, the imperial cavalry crashed into them with furious force, lances glinting as they skewered their foes. Liz joined the fray, cutting men down left and right. Her victims died with terror on their faces. The stench of death suffused the air, growing more pungent with every fresh corpse.

“Aren’t you a spirited little lady!” a voice bellowed.

An enormous figure leaped over the bodies of the enemy’s front line on camelback. He crashed into the imperial charge and began laying waste to the cavalry, cleaving through every man in his path with an enormous greatsword. The weapon was as long as he was tall, but he swung it one-handed, as easily as if it were a stick. Liz’s jaw clenched at the sight of his lilac skin.

“A zlostā?!” she hissed. “What’s a zlostā doing here?!”

The man launched himself from his mount. A cloud of bloodsoaked sand rolled over Liz as he came down before her with a thud. His greatsword roared through the air. Instinctively, she readied Lævateinn. Sparks exploded between them as their blades clashed.

“Ngh!”

Liz grunted as the impact lifted both her and her horse off the ground. The zlostā’s monstrous strength dwarfed that of an ordinary man, but she was no less superhuman. She matched it pound for pound, forcing him away.

“Yaaaaaah!”

If the zlosta had been surprised that Liz had caught his greatsword, he was astonished to find himself pushed back. His eyes turned to the crimson sword in her hand.

“You wield a Spiritblade?” he asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Liz forced a defiant grin, trying to hide the shock ringing through her fingers.

“Such a dainty little thing couldn’t have done that with the strength of her arm.”

“How do you know what I can do? We’ve only just met!”

The zlosta thrust his greatsword into the sand. “There’s no hiding it, girl. I wield Bebensleif, the Fiend of Creation. Only a handful of blades in all of Aletia could repel one of the Fellblades.”

One thousand years ago, the fiends had fashioned five mighty blades to match the Spiritblade Sovereigns: the five Archfiend’s Fellblades. Each harbored the soul of a fiend and, like a Spiritblade, possessed its own will. The five all sought different qualities in their wielders; legend had it that some even chose non-zlosta masters, although such favor came at the price of some manner of curse.

“Besides,” the zlosta rumbled, “you can feel it, can’t you? Your blade sings to meet its old nemesis.”

Liz looked down at Lævateinn. The crimson blade blazed brightly enough to warp the air around it. It radiated eagerness, pushing her to fight. She laid a soothing hand on it as she stared at the zlosta.

“All right, I’ll admit it. This is Lævateinn, the Flame Sovereign.”

“Ah, the first emperor’s favorite. I’m honored to meet such a storied blade. Its Graal is Might, is it not?” The man brandished his greatsword, producing a blast of wind. “Bebensleif’s is Force, as the numbness in your hands attests. But why not let our blades speak for us? After all, it is what they desire.” A savage grin spread across his face. “I am Garda Meteor, vice-commander of the Liberation Army.”

“Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz,” Liz replied. She leaped down from her horse and readied Lævateinn.

Around them, the battle was turning into a slaughter. The Fourth Legion had not only numbers on their side, but positioning as well: the second cavalry was sweeping in from the flank, while the reserves were circling around to the rebel army’s rear. Garda, too, had noticed the tide turning. He glanced around briefly before returning his gaze to Liz.

“But time is upon me,” he said. “I must finish this quickly.”

“What’s the hurry? I have all the time in the world!”

Liz leaped gracefully toward him, swinging Lævateinn. The enormous man blocked her strike with ease, but she knew that the wielder of one of the Fellblades would not be so easily surprised.

“Let me show you why they call it the Flame Sovereign!” Liz cried.

A crimson ripple spread out from the blade, sending serpents of fire to lash at Garda. Grunting in surprise, the zlosta batted Lævateinn aside, twisted around, and slammed his palm against the ground. A wall of mana-infused sand sprang up in front of him, sending the fire glancing uselessly away.

“Haaah!”

Liz drove her fist into the wall. With her full might behind it, the punch broke clean through to catch an unsuspecting Garda square in the face. The zlosta went flying. Once, twice, he bounced across the sand before he rolled to a stop.

Liz looked on, smiling beatifically. “And after all that talk about my Graal,” she called after him. “Don’t tell me you forgot?”

Garda rose slowly to his feet. His grin deepened as he wiped a trickle of blood from his mouth. “That would have knocked a lesser man out cold!” He launched himself forward, closing the distance between them in an instant. Bebensleif, light in his grip, bore down on Liz from above.

“Ngh!” Liz raised Lævateinn in time to block, but the sheer force of the impact drove her ankle-deep into the sand. “If you think that’ll stop me, you’ve got another thing coming!”

She launched a vicious right roundhouse, but Garda caught it with one hand. Not to be deterred, she leaped into the air and planted a front kick on his chest with her left leg. The ball of her foot caught him in the solar plexus, knocking the breath from his lungs. He stumbled back, clutching his abdomen, and flung her away. Her uncontrolled tumble transformed into an elegant arc as she sailed through the air until she touched down in a graceful three-point landing. Lævateinn, however, was not in her grip. It lay uselessly beneath her on the sand. She looked down in dismay at the trembling fingers of her right hand, numbed by Bebensleif's Force.

"You're strong as an ox, I'll give you that," Garda growled, "but it'll do you no good if you can't feel your hands."

"An ox? How rude. I thought I was just a dainty little thing?"

"Hah! You have me dead to rights. I suppose I owed a Spiritblade's chosen a little more respect."

They stared each other down for a while before Garda broke eye contact and looked around. The battlefield was awash with war cries and screams. All around, the corpses of his slain comrades littered the desert sands. He frowned in distaste.

"I'd offer you a proper battle by way of apology, but it seems that will have to wait."

"And you think I'll just let you walk away?"

"If you know what's good for you. You can't even hold your sword."

He was right. The shock was still ringing through Liz's hands.

Garda vaulted back onto his camel. "You've talent, girl. I'll give you five years before you surpass me, if you keep training."

At that moment, a rider came up behind him. "Boss!" he cried. "We can't hold any longer!"

"I know," the zlostá replied. "We've done what we came for. Sound the retreat!"

"Get back here!" Liz shouted. She picked up Lævateinn and leveled it at

Garda, but the zlosta spared her only a single glance before vanishing over the dunes. As she stared bitterly after him, Tris rode up behind her.

“Your Highness!” he cried. “Are you unharmed?!”

“I’m fine. More importantly, what are our losses?”

“We won’t know for sure until the reports come in, but light, I’d say. Lighter than they would have been if you hadn’t kept that blasted zlosta busy, that’s for certain. Should we pursue?”

“No, leave them. Let General von Kilo handle things from here. Make sure the soldiers get any rest they can. The horses too. They must be exhausted.”

“As you command, Your Highness.”

As Tris departed, Liz let out a sigh. She seemed to deflate as the breath left her body.

“I’ve still got a long way to go...”

Hiro makes it look so easy, she thought, allowing herself a rueful smile.

*

The blazing sun had climbed from the east and was now sinking into the west, drenching the land in twilight hues as it crept below the horizon. Soon the curtain of night would fall, rendering the world to the rule of darkness.

Across the sunset desert, buffeted by dry winds, loped a dragon. It ran graceful and unyielding as a gale, its steps swift and sure across the treacherous sand. On its back rode Hiro. Though he had never been able to ride a horse, for whatever reason, the swiftdrake responded readily to his touch.

He was growing close to his destination, but his mount’s need to rest was pressing.

“I’m sure there was a village around here somewhere...”

He slowed the swiftdrake to a trot and pulled a sheet of paper—a map of the Duchy of Lichtein—from his pocket. Scanning the distance, he soon picked out a dark shadow on the horizon.

“Hold on just a little longer, okay?” he whispered to the swiftdrake. The

reptilian bowed its head in what looked like assent, then resumed running.

Over time, the shadow grew larger until it resolved into a collection of earthen houses. Immediately, Hiro sensed that something was amiss; no doubt anyone would have. He dismounted from the swiftdrake and entered the village, keeping a weather eye on his surroundings as he went. An odd silence hung in the streets, and the locals regarded him with apprehension.

With a nudge of thought to the Black Camellia, Hiro conjured a hood and pulled it low over his face. He approached a nearby peasant. "Excuse me," he said. "Is something the matter?"

The peasant looked him up and down with a wary expression. "You new in town?"

It wasn't hard to imagine how the man would react if Hiro explained that he had crossed the border from the Grantzian Empire. Instead, he introduced himself as a recent arrival from the neighboring Republic of Steissen. Two hundred years prior, Lichtein had been part of Steissen. He didn't know whether that had made his story more believable, but at any rate, some of the suspicion left the peasant's face.

"You're a long way from home, right enough," the man said. "Well, you've picked an awful time for a visit."

Presumably, he was talking about the Grantzian invasion, although he could easily have been referring to something else. Hiro decided to press him for more information.

"I've heard the empire's crossed the border," he said.

"Aye, if only that were all of it. The slaves are up in arms in the south. Word is, they beat the duke's army in open battle. The whole nation's not long for this world, I reckon."

"They defeated the duke?"

"That they did. Now Lord Karl's the only one of the ducal family left to keep the land together. He's called every spare soldier to the capital to fight the rebels, leaving us and ours to fend for ourselves against bandits and worse. Even the monsters are swarming, and now the bloody empire's cutting a

swathe through the north. I hear they're knocking on the gates of the capital already."

"They're at the capital?"

The emperor's orders had been to annex the north of Lichtein and force the country into a peace agreement. Why had they taken it upon themselves to march on the capital?

Victory must have gone to their heads.

The Fourth Legion's role was to take the northern oasis cities, then watch for any movement from the other nations along the empire's southern border. The Grantzian Empire had no time for a war with Lichtein. The emperor's focus was on the now-province of Faerzen, while the central nobles were busy circling the various rights and titles that would come with the empire's newest acquisition. None of them would weep to hear of Lichtein's fall, but none would rejoice in it either.

And that's if they win. What if they lose?

The Fourth Legion was strong, but they faced no easy task. The enemy would fight all the more fiercely knowing that their homeland's survival was on the line. If the war dragged on, it would strain the empire's southern border, with ripple effects across the entire nation. Moreover, supplies were not free, and there was a limit to how much they could procure on-site.

Once the food runs out, there's only one thing to do. I only hope Liz isn't feuding with the commander over this.

As Hiro stood in silence, pondering, the peasant spoke again. "You'd best make yourself scarce, friend, afore you get caught up in our woes."

"Why don't you evacuate too?"

"My land's my living. I've got no savings, no nothing. All that's waiting for me on the road is a slow death from an empty belly. Besides, the duke's men'll be back once the war's over." The peasant picked up the rusted sword at his feet and shrugged. "The other nations spit on this land, call it a forsaken dust bowl or a slave nation, but to me, it's where I was born and raised. I'll hold out until the duke's men return, come what may."

The man's voice was full of conviction, but Hiro could not help but notice that his knees were knocking. The nobles of the land could doubtless pay for passage to other nations with their ill-gotten wealth, but only a handful of commonfolk could afford to abandon the land of their birth. Hiro made to offer him some encouragement, but at that moment, one of the villagers shouted from the gate.

"We've got trouble! Bandits, headed our way!"

The man pointed down the road to an approaching dust cloud.

"They squeezed us dry last time and it's not enough for them?"

"Reckon they can bleed us whenever they like, eh? Well, I say we stick the bastards!"

"Aye, we're ready for a scrap! It's time we took our children back!"

As alarm spread through the villagers, Hiro turned back to the man beside him. "They've come before?" he asked.

"Aye, they have, around the time the duke marched on the empire. Must've figured the eyes of the law were elsewhere. Without protection, villages like ours are ripe fruit ready for the picking. Everyone's had women and children taken, us included. Me included."

A wistful look came over him, but he slapped his cheeks, and then his expression became one of determination. "Women and children, into my house and bar the door!" he shouted. "Men, get your weapons! We'll show them we'll not be walked over!" He looked back at Hiro. "And you, make yourself scarce."

Hiro shook his head. Lichtein might ultimately be responsible for the villagers' misery, but there was no denying that the Grantzian invasion had played a part. The empire could not harm other nations' citizens indiscriminately. Even if he wasn't the direct cause of their plight, Hiro had a duty to fight in their defense.

"Could you let me take care of this?" he asked.

The peasant's eyes widened. "Oy, what do you think you're—?"

Hiro did not wait for the man to finish. He walked away and out of the village. Within moments, he was surrounded by bandits.

“You some sorta village spokesman, eh?”

Three men approached on camelback. Seventeen more bandits, dressed in shabby clothes, followed on foot behind them.

“Oy. I asked you a question.”

The central rider was evidently their leader. His suit of silver armor, glinting orange in the evening sun, distinguished him from the rest. The other two riders at his sides weren't dressed in gear quite so fine, but their attire was still sturdier than the cobbled-together apparel the rest were wearing.

Hiro called out in a quavering voice, pretending to be afraid. “Can't we make a deal, sirs? We've got money. We can pay.”

“No deals, brat. Anything you could offer, we'll just take off your corpse.”

“I see. That's a pity.” Hiro summoned Excalibur, thrust it point-down into the ground, and spread his arms wide. A gust of wind sent his overcoat aflutter, catching his hood and baring his face. “Well, then. Who wants to die first?”

The bandits burst out laughing.

“Hey, the kid's got a mouth on him!”

“Best jape I've heard all year!”

“No, no, maybe it's some kinda newfangled diploma-whatsit. Here, boy, I'll go!” One man came forward, crying with laughter as he clutched his belly.

“You first, then.”

As far as the bandits were concerned, Hiro did not move. They heard no rush of air, never saw his silver sword shift from its place in the ground. All they saw was the man's head vanish, a plume of blood rising in its place to paint the sky an even deeper crimson.

“Eh?”

“What in the world...?”

The bandits struggled to process what had happened, even as their comrade's blood splattered them. The headless corpse collapsed, dyeing the desert sand crimson with sprays of blood.

Hiro stood with his arms spread wide, his pose unchanged. “Who wants to die next?” he asked coldly. His hair was as black as sable, as though wrought from darkness, and his eyes were hard and dark as obsidian. Though he stood in the arid desert, a light glinted in their depths as cold as the frost-rimed Grausam Mountains.

A particularly fainthearted bandit shrank back, a whimper slipping from his throat. He turned to run. In the blink of an eye, his head rolled from his shoulders to come to a stop on the sand. His comrades wheeled around as they heard his corpse topple.

“Who next?”

The bandits’ spines turned to ice at Hiro’s voice. They paled as one. With a wordless scream, one of the camel riders lifted his sword high. Before the blade could fall, his head, too, went flying.

“Don’t worry, I’ll leave some of you alive. Someone has to tell me where you’re keeping your captives.”

Hiro grasped Excalibur’s hilt. His mantle billowed as he spun forward. Pitch black swirled before the bandits’ eyes, the embodiment of darkness and the mark of terror. They could only watch, paralyzed, as Hiro cut one man down, then rammed his blade through the next and kicked the corpse away. A moment later, he seemed to vanish from among them. Only the silver trail of his sword remained, passing through them like a glowing thread. It was as though they were wearing no armor at all. Their bodies parted like silk around his blade.

One by one the bandits fell, their lives snuffed out with a single stroke. Their lifeblood watered the sands. As their comrades perished around him, the rest descended into panic. One could hardly blame them; they could not even see what was killing them. Some fled, some fought, and some froze with fear. Those who fled were dismembered, those who fought were beheaded, and those who froze were cut down all the same.

“What’s happening?”

The leader’s vacant expression told plainly that no other words came to mind.

“This must be a dream... Just a bad dream...” He stared blankly at the corpses that had once been his comrades.

One of his underlings ran up to him, his face pale. “We’ve gotta get out of here, boss! He’s a monst—”

The man got no further. His body collapsed to the sand as though making itself a gift to the desert. The other bandits’ screams had turned to silence, stifled in their throats by terror.

“Run, you fools!”

The bandit leader wheeled his camel about and made to flee. Hiro launched himself after the man, seized him by the collar, and flung him from his mount. As the bandit crashed to the ground on his back, Hiro drove his fist into the man’s face.

“Agh! Urgh! Nngh!”

Hiro rained down punch after punch, before finishing with a kick to the face that left the man convulsing in agony. Until then, he had been wielding Excalibur backhanded, but he spun the blade around nimbly as he stood and leveled it, perfectly horizontal, at the throat of the bandit creeping up behind him. The man dropped the sword he had been hoping to drive into Hiro’s back. Tears beaded in the corners of his eyes.

“Spare my life, I beg you!” he cried. “I’ll do no more thieving, honest I won’t!”

“All right,” Hiro said.

“F-For true?”

“If you can get away.”

“Wha—? Agh!”

For just an instant, the man’s face lit up with hope before a gleaming blade pierced through his neck. He collapsed, hacking up gouts of blood. The rest of the bandits threw away their weapons and scattered in all directions. Hiro coldly watched them run for a moment, then disappeared in a flash of silver.

The villagers looked on, dumbfounded, as the men who had come to ransack their homes fell in the blink of an eye. Hiro returned to them, dragging the

unconscious bandit leader by the scruff of the neck. He dumped the man unceremoniously in front of them.

“This is the leader of the men who attacked your village,” he said. “He’s yours to do with as you will.”

As they struggled for words, he turned away and strode to where his swift Drake was resting under the shade of a tree.

“I made certain to leave some of the others alive. One of them will cough up the location of their hideout, I’m sure. You’ll get your women and children back.”

He might have saved their village, but after the display of inhuman power he had put on, he would no longer be welcome—or so he thought, but as he made to leave, a voice called out to him.

“Not so fast. The nights get cold here, as I’m sure you know. Have you got a roof over your head tonight?”

Hiro turned to find the peasant man he had spoken to when he first arrived.

“I’ve got friends a little farther up the road,” he replied. “I’ll spend the night there.”

“That so? Well, just hold on.” The man turned on his heel and vanished among the houses. He reappeared in short order, holding a blanket and a stack of provisions. “Here, take this. It’s not much, but it’ll help you on your way.”

“But... I don’t... That’s yours,” Hiro protested.

The peasant interrupted him with a shake of his head. “I’d pay you in coin if I had it, but we’re a poor lot. I’m afraid this is all we can spare.”

If they were that poor, food would be just as valuable as money. Even a single blanket would be hard to give up, all the more so after having been attacked by bandits. Yet the peasant man insisted, smiling all the while.

“Food’s no good to the dead. It’s only thanks to you that we’re still alive to eat. I’ve got to thank you somehow.”

The man’s eyes made it clear that he would not be dissuaded.

Hiro gave a sigh of surrender. “All right. I’ll take it, erm...” He searched for the man’s name and realized he didn’t know it.

The man seemed to guess from his expression. “Kukuri. I’m the mayor of this village.”

“I’m Hiro. I won’t forget this, Kukuri.”

“Seems to me I should be the one saying that to you.” Kukuri gave a self-effacing smile.

Hiro bowed deep to the man. He turned back to his swiftdrake, sending his overcoat billowing. It was time to bring this war to a swift and sure end, he decided. Otherwise, more villages like this one would suffer.

Just as he made to leave the village, a shout rose from behind him.

“You’ve all our thanks, friend! Next time you come around, we’ll have a feast in your honor!”

Hiro turned to see Kukuri and the rest of the villagers waving. Smiling to himself, he pulled on the reins. The swiftdrake loosed a proud roar that echoed to the heavens.

Hiro’s destination was a fort twenty-seven sel away. With a swiftdrake to carry him, the journey took less than an hour. The sharp chill of the desert night had just begun to set in when he arrived.

He could tell that the fort had once been a proud edifice, but only a shadow of its glory now remained. The Fourth Legion had burned it to the ground when they had captured it, leaving only a forlorn ruin. Still, it made an ideal place to hide—and an ideal place to converse without being overheard.

“I’ve been awaiting you, Your Highness.”

A soldier melted silently out of the darkness. He was one of Kiork’s men, the commander of the platoon Hiro had written to the margrave to send ahead.

“Is everything in place?” Hiro asked.

“It is, Your Highness. All is as you commanded. Come.”

The man set off. Hiro fell in behind him.

“Where are the rest?” Hiro asked.

“Lying low inside the fort, Your Highness.”

The commander stopped by a gatehouse and opened the door. He gestured for Hiro to follow him. Inside were fifty armored men. They stood as one and bowed as Hiro entered.

Hiro raised a hand. “At ease.” He approached the central table. “Where is the Fourth Legion currently?”

“We won’t know for certain until our scouts return, but our best guess puts them around here.” The commander pointed at the map laid out on the table. “That’s one day’s ride from here, Your Highness, half a day by swift Drake.”

“And the rebel army?”

“Here, as of four days ago.” The man indicated a point thirty-two sel distant from the fort.

“And where is the ducal army in all this?”

“They haven’t moved from the capital, Your Highness. They’ve been calling soldiers from across the land, but it seems they’re preparing for a siege. More nobles’ flags fly over the battlements with every passing day.”

“Flags?”

“Yes, Your Highness. Is that odd?”

“A little.” Hiro picked up a pawn and placed it on the map. “This...Fort Arzabah, near Azbakal. Can you tell me anything about it?”

The soldiers’ gazes converged on the pawn.

“Nothing definite, Your Highness. I believe it has a garrison of two thousand. It’s in a strong strategic position with a good view of all sides, so our forces haven’t been able to crack it.”

Hiro stared silently at the map, imagining himself as the enemy general. One by one, he hatched plans in his head and watched them play out.

I could lure the imperials into a killing field and cut off their supply lines, but they’d turn unpredictable in their desperation. I’d need to either chase them into

a fort and starve them or split them up and pick off the remnants one by one. But those would both take longer than I have.

The lack of time was key. That would severely limit the duchy's options.

I'm short on time and short on men. Other nations are eyeing me up. I need to drive the empire back quickly and decisively enough to make my neighbors think twice. And the only way to do that with the numbers I have...is to lure the empire into fighting the rebel army, then crush the victor while they're still in disarray.

So where would they want the battle to happen? What kind of location would they look for?

It has to be Fort Arzabah. It's the only place that's close enough to the battlefield to have a good view, but close enough to the capital to retreat if necessary. The flags on the walls are a distraction, nothing more.

With his thoughts crystallized, Hiro looked up.

"Who are the duchy's most notable generals?" he asked.

"Almost all of them died in battle with the rebel army," the commander said.

"Then who do they have left?"

"Only one, Your Highness. A man named Rankeel Caligula Gilbrist."

"How experienced is he?"

"He first made a name for himself two years ago, Your Highness. When the Republic of Steissen marched on Lichtein with thirty thousand men, he drove them back with fewer than three thousand. They took to calling him the Rising Hawk, on account of the way he evened the odds."

"And the duke sent him from the capital out of fear of his ability?"

"Precisely, Your Highness. It seems he spoke a little too much truth to power. The duke named him commander of the border watch and sent him to guard the nation against Steissen. A task equal to his talents, even if it was only intended to keep him away from the capital."

So the army and the people love him, but the nobles hate him.

That presented an exploitable opening—one that could potentially crack the ducal army apart. Hiro reached for a nearby sheet of parchment and bottle of ink and began to write.

“This details my future plans.”

He handed the parchment to the commander. The man read it through and looked back at Hiro.

“Do you mean to continue on to the Fourth Legion, Your Highness?”

If Hiro started riding right then and there by swift Drake, he could reach Liz by noon of the next day. All of these men’s instructions were contained on the parchment. He did not need to be here to see them carried out.

“Yes, immediately. Do you have any concerns?”

“None, Your Highness. We’ll see your orders done.”

“Excellent. I’ll leave them in your capable hands.”

“Of course, Your Highness. Please give our regards to Lady Celia Estrella.”

Hiro left under the gaze of the soldiers. The night was bitterly chill, but clad in the Black Camellia, he did not seem to feel the cold.

Chapter 4: One-Eyed Dragon

Beneath the gaze of a scorching sun, the Fourth Legion clashed with the six thousand soldiers of the Liberation Army. The rebels had fallen into a spearhead formation, with the first cohort—the vanguard—and the second composed of freedmen. The core and the rearguard were made up of camel riders, the latter mostly sellswords. As the name implied, the army resembled the tip of a spear.

In response, the Fourth Legion had taken up a dragon-wing formation. The first cohort—two thousand and five hundred soldiers—formed a defensive bloc in the center, with a core of one thousand behind. Wings of two thousand soldiers spread to each flank; these would play the vital role of encircling the enemy. To either side of the core were the third and fourth cohorts, each with five hundred men apiece. The remaining one thousand and five hundred men waited at the rear in reserve.

“Loose arrows!” cried Kigui Makarl von Zraki, General von Kilo’s vice-commander and the commander of the first cohort. “These slaves must be starving. Let them feast on wood and steel!”

He raised a hand and signaled to the standard-bearers. One large standard thrust into the sky. A volley of arrows rose from the first cohort to rain down on the enemy. Rebel soldiers fell to the sand in droves, but their charge kept its momentum. Soon the front line was ringing with the clashing of swords. With their scavenged gear, the freedmen made poor opponents for the Fourth Legion’s well-forged steel, but they pushed the imperials back through sheer force of will.

“They’re only slaves, you wretches! Show some spine!” Kigui watched, incredulous, as the center bowed under the rebel assault. If nothing was done, the rebels would open a path for their cavalry to slam home. “Stop them, whatever it takes!” he cried, but his voice failed to reach the front lines. The camel riders were already pouring into the breach, crushing armored soldiers beneath their mounts’ hooves. The freedmen’s battle cries drew steadily closer.

Kigui reached into the pocket of his uniform and withdrew a bundle of spirit seals. He drove his heels into his horse's flanks. "It seems I must do this myself!"

As he surged toward the fray, a camel appeared before him, bearing on its back an enormous man with lilac skin—a zlosta.

"You must be the one Her Highness spoke of!" Kigui shouted.

In that moment, Kigui should have fled—should have fallen back—but the spirit seals in his hand instilled him with a fatal confidence. He drew a red strip of paper from the bunch and hurled it, conjuring a blazing fireball.

"What parlor trick is this?" Garda snorted as he reached out and crushed the flames in his fist.

Dismay spread across Kigui's face as he threw the rest of his stock. Icicles fell, a gale howled, lightning crashed from the heavens—but Garda stopped them all with his bare hands.

"Is that all?" the zlosta scoffed.

"Impossible..." Kigui spluttered. "What kind of monster are you?!"

Garda grinned as he closed the last few rue between them. "A fiendkin."

Those were the last words that Kigui ever heard. Garda's greatsword sliced through the air in a horizontal sweep. Kigui's head sailed high, trailing blood from its severed stump. His body toppled from his horse.

Garda did not even cast a glance back at the corpse. "Break through the center!" he cried. "Take the commander's head!"

The zlosta turned his gaze forward to find a host of Grantzian cavalry barring his way. They fell on him from all sides, their faces twisted with fury. Bebensleif danced light as a feather in his hand. A slash to his right, a thrust to his fore, a turn to his left swinging clear into a vertical slice. Five soldiers died in an instant. The cavalry reeled with shock, but their pride as the empire's finest kept them from retreat. Garda's camel riders surged from behind to crash into them, eager to support their leader.

"With me!" Garda cried. "To victory!" He prepared to plunge into the Fourth Legion's forces. At that moment, a streak of crimson fire blasted into him from

the side.

“Back again, little lady?” he roared. “I won’t go so easy on you this time!”

“Nor I you!” Liz shouted back. She leaped from her horse, tracing a high arc through the sky.

“You’ve courage, girl! Lucky for you, I’m not one for killing children! Turn tail now and I’ll let you go!”

Liz unleashed a barrage of slashes as she passed overhead. Garda hefted his greatsword to knock them aside. Sparks sprayed between them, fizzling out before they hit the ground.

The zlosta spun and launched himself from the back of his camel, barreling toward Liz as she touched down. He swung his enormous blade in a reaping slice. Liz caught the sword with her own—barely—but the force of the blow knocked her back, separating them once more.

“It’s not too late to run,” Garda called across the distance. “I won’t chase you. Surely you have better things to do than die here.”

Liz flashed a defiant grin. “I’m not planning on dying.”

Garda’s eyes widened at her composure. He sensed no fear or panic from her, only the dutiful resolve that smoldered in her crimson eyes.

“Know your limits, girl. You must realize I’m the stronger of us.”

“If I back down here, I’ll only end up doing the same thing when I run into the next wall, and the next after that. I won’t let myself get used to running away.” Liz brushed her crimson hair back behind her shoulders. She raised Lævateinn, ready to fight.

“That so, eh? I wondered why a Spiritblade chose someone so young, but I’m starting to see why.”

Despite her years, she was pure and noble of heart, and she refused to flinch at obstacles in her path. For her flame to be snuffed out here would be a tragic loss. Yet Garda had his own reasons for why he could not retreat.

“Then let’s finish this,” he growled.

“Yes, let’s. It’s about time I wiped that smirk off your face!”

Liz dug her toes into the sand and kicked up high. A cloud of granules blew into Garda’s eyes. Seeing her chance, she swung with a mighty blow, aiming to sever the zlosta’s head.

“You can have your tricks, girl—but I’ll teach you not to break your stance!”

Garda ducked beneath the blade with an agility that belied his bulk. As surprise came over Liz’s face, he slammed his palm into the ground and unleashed a surge of mana. The sand tangled around her leg, thwarting her balance and sending her sprawling. She tried to rise, but her trapped foot kept her locked in place. A shadow fell over her. She looked up to see Garda lifting his greatsword high.

“I’m not done yet!”

Liz drove her fist into the ground, blasting a plume of sand into the air. Garda’s greatsword missed its mark as surprise sent his aim astray. Now freed, Liz leaped high over the zlosta’s head to land in his blind spot.

“Yaaah!” She lunged forward with Lævateinn, Garda’s unprotected back before her.

“You ought to have learned the first time!” Sensing her intent, Garda swung around to meet her. Their swords clashed, setting the air ringing with a metallic keening.

“This is the end for you!” Liz cried. Lævateinn matched her resolve, unleashing a blast of flame.

Garda scowled. He tried to jump back, but Liz pressed the advantage, mixing feints with her attacks as she closed the distance. She used her fists when it suited her, moved to sweep his legs when he dodged her punches, planted her feet and stepped in when her sweep failed. The honed efficiency of her motions prompted an admiring grin from the zlosta’s lips.

“Impressive. I barely recognize you!”

Spiritblades conceded their power in accordance with the strength of their master’s will, and uncommonly fervent convictions could push them to even

greater heights. The crucial question was how strongly the wielder's desires resonated with their weapon.

In other words, Liz had awakened to her destiny. Though she was still struggling to break through her unremarkable shell, she had taken her first step on the path before her—on the road to becoming a legend.

"Such progress in so short a time," Garda breathed. "How easily you humans defy our expectations. This is why you make such troublesome foes."

He, however, had his own cause to fight for. His own reason to seek victory at any cost.

"But I'll not fall here—or what would become of Mille?"

Mana surged from within the zlosta's body. The manastone on his forehead flared with a fierce light.

"What are you—?!" Liz froze. Her determined expression slid away, replaced by apprehension. Garda's body had swollen to twice its original size.

"My turn. I'll need to make this quick if the Liberation Army is to stand a chance."

Garda swung his greatsword down with all his might. Liz scrambled out of the way at the last second. The blade came down on the spot she had been standing not a moment before, leaving an enormous crater.

"Let me show you why all of Soleil once feared us!"

Garda whirled Bebensleif in a frenzy of blows. Liz tried to seize the initiative, but the greatsword's terrible weight beat her back. Slowly, the tide turned. Bebensleif's wake alone sliced her cheek open, and only her Spiritblade's blessing saved her from worse—without that, it would have torn her face to shreds. Blood sprayed from the soldiers around her as the razor wind ravaged their bodies.

"I'm the one you want, not them!" Liz yelled, charging forward with wild abandon.

She thrust with Lævateinn—but in vain. Garda reached out and seized the crimson blade in one mighty fist.

“You’ll need more than that to stop me,” the zlostá grunted.

“Happy to oblige!”

Liz’s fist crashed into Garda’s cheek. A dull *thud* shook the air, as though she had struck a block of iron, but the enormous man only grinned as he looked down on her.

“It’s no use, little lady. Can’t you feel your power ebbing?”

Confusion flashed through Liz’s eyes. In the throes of her battle high, she hadn’t realized it, but it was true. She was flushed with the spirits’ power, too much so, and she had been expending it in vast quantities to compensate for her own shortcomings. She had been fighting with an open tap. Now her lack of discipline had added to her exhaustion, while her power had left her body sorely used.

“A shame. If you’d wielded it better, I might have been the one to fall here.”

Garda’s eyes were cold as he launched his attack. Liz fought back as best she could, but it wasn’t enough. She collapsed to her knees, sweat pouring from her body.

“At least I can grant you a quick death,” the zlostá said.

Bebensleif fell. Liz weakly raised Lævateinn to block it, but the impact sent the crimson blade spinning away.

“I’m...not...done!” she grunted, struggling to rise, but her legs betrayed her. She toppled face-first into the sand.

Garda strode up to her, raising his greatsword to deal the final blow. “I’m not one for killing women or children, but all’s fair in war.”

With what almost sounded like an apology, he made to swing the blade down—only to find that he could not.

“What...?”

A searing chill assailed him from behind. He spun around in alarm—and saw darkness there, billowing, deep enough to drain the light from the world, though the sun was high. As he watched, it drank in light from all around, deepening to an even blacker and more malignant shade. A soft light glimmered

in the heart of the storm. Something emerged, sand crunching beneath its feet.

Garda instinctively raised his blade. Cold sweat dripped from his forehead.

“Who in the world are you?”

Out from the darkness came a boy, his soft features squarely at odds with the unsightly eyepatch covering his face. He smiled a nightmarish smile as he approached. He did not answer Garda’s question.

“I’ll need you to step away from Liz.”

Garda barely had time to register the boy’s voice before a tremendous impact blasted through his abdomen.

*

As the zlosta went flying, Hiro turned his attention to Liz. He ran to her side. “Are you all right?”

“Hiro...” she responded weakly. With the power of the spirits running wild inside her body, her breathing was pained and shallow.

Hiro’s gaze softened as he looked down at her. He wrapped an arm behind her head and sat her upright.

“Just relax. Breathe deep. Think happy thoughts. Can you do that for me?”

She was not yet ready to rise to such heights. Even Artheus, a prodigy of his age, had taken two years before he could withstand their toll. Hiro’s gaze fell on the crimson sword lying at her side. Just what was Lævateinn thinking?

“Hiro... I...”

“Ssh. Don’t say it. Keep it tucked away safe.”

If what she was about to say was giving her strength, he didn’t want to hear it. Better for her to keep it locked away in her heart where it could fuel her Spiritblade’s flames.

Hiro drew a deep breath and laid her on the ground. “I’ll take it from here,” he said. “Don’t worry. I won’t be long.”

With that, he stood up and turned away.

“What *are* you?” The zlostā had risen to his feet at last. Now he was approaching.

Hiro’s smile deepened into a ghastly grin. “You’re still standing. Not bad...but how about this?”

His black mantle fluttered as he spun, swinging his silver sword with all his might.

“Did you not hear me, boy?!”

For all its strength, the attack was slow. The zlostā batted it aside with ease.

“Yah!” Hiro followed up. The razor edge of his sword carved a precise arc toward the zlostā’s vitals. His foe dodged at the last second, but the sword tip still grazed the man’s lilac skin, sending blood splattering across the sands.

The zlostā tried to strike back, but Hiro angled his body sideways and leaned out of the way. The greatsword crashed down inches from Hiro’s nose. As the zlostā’s eyes widened, Hiro stepped in to unleash a flurry of his own.

“Hah!”

“Ngh?!”

The irregular rhythm of Hiro’s strikes kept the larger man off-balance, but keeping up was the zlostā’s only choice. A single misstep would see his head roll. As he struggled to fend off the silver blade, an explosive kick smashed into his side. He tottered but did not fall. A trickle of blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth. He wiped it away as he glared at Hiro.

“Even now, at the eleventh hour, more men appear to oppose me.” The zlostā swept his sweat-slicked hair back from his forehead, revealing the small violet crystal embedded in his brow. “Truly, I was not born lucky.”

Hiro’s stance was so slovenly, anybody would have thought he was distracted, but the zlostā knew better. He sensed the fearsome presence radiating from that scrawny body—an aura of raw might that spoke of experience on countless battlefields tempered by years of devoted study. To find it in a child so young was nothing short of astonishing.

The man broke into roaring laughter. “Gah ha ha ha! A natural-born warrior,

that's what you are!"

Finding such ferocity in a boy so many years his junior, he could not help but smile. He threw his weight behind his greatsword, heaving it in a mighty uppercut like it weighed no more than a twig. It churned up sand in its wake as it sped toward his foe.

Hiro raised the tip of his gleaming sword an inch or two, but that was his only answer.

Blades clashed. The greatsword skittered along the upturned edge of its silver counterpart, showering them in sparks.

"You've some skill, boy!" the zlostā laughed. The parry threatened to open up his guard, but he converted the momentum of his deflected swing into a thrust with the heel of his palm. He aimed for Hiro's eyepatch, where the boy could not see him coming, but—

"Nice try, but that's my better eye."

Hiro twisted to avoid the blow. The effort left him open, and most warriors would have tried to press the advantage, but the zlostā knew better. He recognized the bait.

"Then I'll blind you in both!"

Instead, he kicked up a cloud of sand with the toe of his boot. Yellow grit obscured Hiro's vision. The zlostā took the chance to launch himself backward. As he landed a safe distance away, he sensed something amiss and glanced down at his right arm. Blood dripped from a neat cut across his skin.

"I was right to retreat, it seems..."

He raised his head to see Hiro dispel the dust cloud with a dismissive slash. A bead of sweat trickled down his cheek from his brow. He wiped it away on his shoulder. When he looked back ahead, he was grinning.

"I'm impressed, enemy or not. How a boy so young achieved such mastery of the warrior's art, I do not know. But admiration will do me no good. I must find a way to turn the tide."

Their eyes burned into one another, trying to see one, two steps ahead.

Whoever predicted his foe's next move would be the victor. To move too hastily would mean death. They faced each other down in a mental tug-of-war, battling to seize the initiative.

The zlostā laughed. "How I've missed this! The thrill of life and death hanging in the balance! There is no higher joy. My heart sings with delight!" A shiver played over his skin as he trembled with excitement. "Come, One-Eyed Dragon! A fight to the death, winner takes all! You can't say fairer than that! My name is Garda Meteor, and I challenge you!"

His dry lips split into a full-faced grin. He spun, driving the tip of his greatsword—as long as he was tall—into the sand.

Hiro glanced at the blade, then gave a dismissive shrug. "You zlostā and your obsession with killing," he said. "Unlike you, I'm not a brute."

As he spoke, his mouth widened into a savage smile, putting the lie to his words. The expression made an unsettling fit for his youthful face. Liz's forehead furrowed with concern. Hiro glanced at her, then reined in his fury just a little.

"But I'm afraid I'm in a bad mood right now," he continued. "So I'm not going to let you off easy."

Nothingness flowed through him. Shedding every last vestige of his emotions, he gave himself to the abyss. He raised his silver sword before his chest and leveled it at his foe.

The world was still for a moment, then a shower of sparks exploded between them. The clashing of metal echoed across the battlefield. With neither combatant desiring a protracted struggle, every strike was meant to kill. Still, their difference in skill gradually made itself known. Unable to match Hiro's speed, Garda fell further and further behind, until he sensed the battle slipping too far out of his control and sprang away.

"What is that weapon you wield?" he asked. "You hide its power well, but not well enough. It blazes like a beacon to me. Yet no song or tale tells of any such sword. At least, none that I know." The zlostā skewered Hiro with a searching gaze. His muscular body swelled with mana. "I ask you again, One-Eyed Dragon. Just what is that blade of yours?"

“Bebensleif’s Graal is Force. Lævateinn’s is Might. Each of the Five Noble Blades has its own Graal, a unique expression of itself. No two are alike. That should be your answer.” Hiro’s face took on a sly cast. “But I could make it clearer, if you’d like.”



He took a shallow breath, brandished Excalibur high—and launched into motion.

“What—?”

Garda only had a moment to register his surprise before a streak of sublime light bore down on him. Liegegrazalt was its name—a blistering assault accelerated to supersonic speeds. The Heavenly Sovereign’s Godspeed left the realm of sound behind.

Garda thrust Bebensleif forward to guard against the flurry, but his right arm buckled, spraying blood. Before he could even grimace in pain, another streak of light was upon him. That, he could not block or evade. Blood sprayed across his enormous frame.

“Gaaah!”

The zlostā tried to fight back, but he could not even see his enemy. He could only swing blindly, chasing the blur of Hiro’s ghost. The streaks of light multiplied, mocking his efforts. Countless lacerations scored his skin.

“Behind you.”

Hiro solidified into being behind Garda’s back to plant a brutal kick in his ribs. For a moment, Garda threatened to topple, but then he flared with mana, bracing his legs with sand to weather the impact. Gritting his teeth, he spun around with all his might, sweeping Bebensleif around to clear the clotted air. Hiro leaped high before the blade could draw close.

“I’ve got you now!” Garda growled. “In midair, you’re a sitting duck!” His trap sprung, the zlostā thrust his greatsword directly at Hiro.

“Guess again.” Hiro summoned a spirit weapon beneath his feet. Using the impromptu foothold to correct his trajectory, he brought Excalibur down with vicious force.

“Bah!” Garda spat as he was forced back onto the defensive. Like that, he was once more fending off Hiro’s ever-changing assault. He blocked the boy’s blade only to see a fist bearing down on him; he dodged the punch only for a kick to slam into his belly; he stopped the kick only to find that silver blade coming for

his throat.

“Stay still, curse you!”

Snarling in anger, he swung desperately, but his swings only found thin air. In the sweltering heat, his wild motions sapped his strength. Before long, he fell to his knees in exhaustion, his chest heaving. Sweat gushed from his forehead. Blood trickled from his countless wounds.

Hiro looked down at his foe and lowered his sword. “Have you had enough yet?”

“Don’t mock me. I’m far from done!”

Hiro sighed. “That’s a shame. I’d hoped for a peaceful surrender.”

He wiped away his sweat with the back of his hand, catching his breath, and looked around. Battle cries rose into the air as the imperial soldiers slaughtered the enemy. They pulled riders from their camels, mobbed the men as they struggled to rise, and hacked them to death. The rebel army’s initial momentum had long petered out.

“Stand firm, men!” someone shouted. “Mars watches over us!”

The imperials, clad in their heavy armor, were no ordinary warriors—they were the Grantzian Empire’s Fourth Legion, protectors of the south. Although the zlostas had slain their commander, Kigui, they were experienced enough not to descend into panic. If anything, they fell on the rebel army with renewed fury. The wings closed around from the sides, making the enclosure complete. Shouts and cries drifted on the wind from the enemy lines, accompanied by the stench of blood and death.

Hiro turned away from the hellish spectacle and back to Garda. “Besides,” he said, “you can hardly use your Fellblade.”

He had fought a wielder of Bebensleif before. On that occasion he had not been able to pick them apart so easily. A mighty warrior in their own right, their skillful use of the Fellblade’s Force had restricted his agility and forced him onto the back foot. Even with Excalibur’s blessing lending him strength, this should not have been such an easy fight—Garda’s Fellblade should have been granting the zlostas the same boon. Hiro had a theory about that, however.

“I don’t know what your sword saw in you,” he said, “but whatever it is, you’re losing it. Although I’m sure you know that even better than I do.”

Garda grinned sheepishly. “I’ll admit it. It’s all but given up on me, and yes, I know why. But still, I choose to fight. I must.”

“You’ll never be able to beat me without it.”

This was not the world of a thousand years ago. In this age, the spirits ruled Soleil. Though they stayed away from Lichtein, the atmospheric mana here would still be extremely thin. Garda’s manastone would do him no good with its true power inaccessible. With his Fellblade abandoning him on top of that, he had no hope of defeating Hiro.

“Surrender. Please. I’ll make sure you’re treated well.”

That was a lie—there was every chance that circumstance would force Hiro to make cruel use of Garda and the rest of the rebels—but he could not say that. It would only encourage them to fight harder.

Whether or not Garda had seen through Hiro’s charade, the zlostia answered with a defiant snort. “Make us. I’m sure you’ll have no trouble, seeing how easily you bested me.”

Hiro had a contingency plan for this eventuality, one that involved breaking Garda’s will to fight. First, he had to rattle the man.

“You know,” he said, “you spend an awful lot of time looking over your shoulder.” The zlostia kept his face impassive, but Hiro didn’t miss the way he flinched. “There’s someone important to you back there, isn’t there?”

Several times throughout their battle, Garda had seemed distracted. Even now, though he was in mortal danger, his attention was still divided between Hiro and something behind his back.

“You wouldn’t dare.” The zlostia glared up at Hiro with undisguised fury. It was as good as an admission.

Hiro considered for a moment. “Liz!” he called. “Can you stand?”

“I... Yes. I’m all right. Better than I was, anyway.”

“I need you to go into the heart of their army. Fetch the girl they call their

leader.”

The zlosta reacted just as Hiro expected. “Over my dead body!” he bellowed. As his fury swelled, the very air around him began to warp. Hiro sensed an outpouring of a tremendous amount of mana. A stinging heat scorched his skin.

This, he hadn’t quite expected. It was rare for a zlosta to care at all for any member of another race, let alone to this degree. Typically, they considered anything other than pureblood zlosta to be inferior species. At the very least, they had made no secret of their prejudices a thousand years ago; they had regarded the other peoples with contempt, of value only as slaves. The zlosta were superior beings, they believed, their primacy beyond question. It was that very arrogance that had cost them the war against the Fourfold Alliance. Garda might simply be an anomaly, but in any case, if this girl really did mean something to him, they would have to move quickly.

“Go, Liz. I can handle this.”

The rebel army was surrounded. Before long, the girl would fall victim to the fighting. If she really was Garda’s *raison d’etre*, her death would mean the end of any chance for his surrender. The Fourth Legion and the rebels would continue to fight until one of them wiped the other out. From a strategic perspective, that would be a disaster. Word of the battle had surely already reached the ducal army. If the Lichtein forces flanked them now, even the Fourth Legion would not last.

Besides, I can’t afford to suffer major losses. Not if I’m going to make a good account of myself.

He needed a victory that would give the central nobles no grounds for complaint. The best way to do that was to force the rebels to surrender, then repel the ducal army.

“I’m counting on you, Liz.”

“Consider it done.” Liz vaulted back into the saddle and turned her mount toward the remnants of the rebel army.

“I think not!” Garda made to follow her, but Hiro moved between them, with Excalibur leveled at the zlosta’s chest.

“No, / think not. This is over.”

They had discovered where Garda’s heart lay, and Hiro trusted that Liz would recover the girl. The zlosta had as good as lost.

The giant man snorted. “If you want to keep me here, you’ll have to cut off my feet.” He lunged for Hiro.

Hiro slipped inside the zlosta’s guard. “Sorry, but you need to take a nap for a while.”

He drove his fist directly into Garda’s face from point-blank range. As the man’s head snapped back, Hiro grabbed it, drove a knee into Garda’s stomach, then spun and smashed his heel into the side of the man’s skull. His foe grunted in pain, rocking on his feet. Hiro grasped the zlosta by the face and flung him flat, sending up a cloud of sand. He raised his leg high, blowing the sand away in the process, and brought his foot down hard on Garda’s solar plexus, driving the zlosta’s body down into the sand. At last, his foe was out cold.

Hiro turned to the nearby soldiers. “Tie him up tight. I don’t want him running away.”

He replaced his grip on Excalibur’s hilt and took off toward the rebel troops still putting up a fight.

“Eaaagh!”

“He’s coming! He’s coming for us!”

Garda’s defeat sent a wave of dismay through his army. Some of the rebels tried to break and flee, but they were surrounded. There was no hope of escape.

“It’s no use running, you lackwits!” a cry went up. “We’ve got to help the boss!”

If escape wasn’t an option, they would have to fight—but they had no chance against an enemy they could not even see. Hiro cut them down in the blink of an eye. Every swish of his sword drew forth a new scream and a new spray of gore. Blood began to pool in the desert sands. Cheers went up from the imperial lines as their enemy wilted. The bodies were piled high when the front

lines of the second cohort bellowed a victory cry. The rebels' resistance flagged, and despair spread through their ranks.

"Now it's all up to Liz."

By then, the battle was over, but a few pockets of resistance still held out. Hiro would need Garda and the girl to convince the most determined rebels to yield.

He threaded his way back through the rebel lines, past men who were already laying down their weapons, and returned to where he had left Garda. A huddle of imperial soldiers surrounded the zlost, obscuring him from view. There were too many to simply be guarding him. Hiro pushed his way through the group and into the clearing at the center.

"This is our world, fiendkin! And when you defy us...*this* is what you get!"

A noble's offspring clad in expensive armor was raining kicks down on Garda, with other soldiers joining in the violence.

"If not for Zertheus's mercy, Mars would have ended your line a thousand years ago! You forget your debts, you ungrateful cur!"

Hiro understood the men's frustrations. They had just seen their comrades slaughtered before their eyes. It was only natural for emotions to be running high. If they had been a little more discreet about it, he would have let them be. What he could not overlook, however, were subordinates willing to publicly undermine the interests of the army for the sake of venting their anger.

"I would suggest you leave it there." Hiro's tone made it clear that he would not take no for an answer. Affronted stares converged on him from all sides.

"Oh, you would, would you?" the noble sneered. "And who do you think you're talking to?"

"You and your lackeys."

"Do you know who I am, boy?"

"Please, enlighten me. I'm sure your career must be illustrious."

"You have the honor of addressing Daniele von Edouard, commander of the Twenty-Sixth Battalion."

The good Sir Edouard must have been stationed toward the rear of the first cohort. If he had witnessed Hiro fight, he would not have put on such airs. Indeed, the soldiers who had seen Hiro's charge were slowly shrinking away. Sir Edouard must have decided to show his face after hearing about the captured zlostas. Not only had he acted outside of orders, he had done so to enable mistreatment of a prisoner. That constituted a clear violation of military regulations—one Hiro could not ignore.

"I'll give you a choice, boy," Sir Edouard sneered. "Be my cupbearer or be a corpse."

A battalion commander would make for an ideal example to impress upon the men the rule of law. Meanwhile, in the battles to come, this man's life would be worth less than Garda's. Hiro's mind settled on the conclusion that his future plans had no need for Daniele von Edouard.

"I won't give you a choice at all," Hiro said. "You won't be hard to replace."

The man narrowed his eyes, perplexed. "What?"

"Didn't you hear? I said your life is worthless to me."

"You little—"

Sir Edouard made to grab Hiro, but his head sailed free from his shoulders, trailing a ribbon of blood through the air. It hit the ground with a red splash, its features still contorted in rage.

"Well, that's not quite true. Your death was quite educational."

As the soldiers watched in stunned silence, Hiro crouched beside Garda.

"Are you all right?"

"I've woken to worse," the zlostas grunted.

"I don't want you dying on me. Don't worry. I'll make sure no one else gets any bright ideas."

"I'll take a hundred of these milksops over whatever you are."

Hiro chuckled. "I'll take that as a compliment."

He stood up and looked around. By then, the soldiers had recovered their

wits. Their hands were drifting to their hilts. Some looked on the verge of drawing steel.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Hiro warned. “That’s punishable by death.”

His swiftdrake stalked through the group to his side, glaring at the soldiers as it passed. He removed the long pole hanging from the beast’s flank and drove it into the ground. The wind seized the fabric wrapped around the tip and flung it wide. There, beneath the bright blue sky, fluttered the heraldry of a man who had once been myth—a sight now spoken of only in legends and seen only in picture books, so holy was it to the people of the Grantzian Empire. A dragon on a black field, clutching a silver sword: the sacred standard of Mars, the second emperor and the War God of the Twelve Divines. The *sazul*.

The soldiers were struck dumb. Their eyes moved between Hiro and the flag, the flag and Hiro, as though they were looking at some kind of legendary beast. Nobody spoke. They could only stand with mouths agape.

In the end, it was Garda who broke the silence with a bellowing laugh. “I see now. I see it all!” The zlostas roared his fury to the sky as Hiro looked on. “*This* is why you spared my life?! *This* is what you wanted?! You *used* me!”

As the last syllable left Garda’s mouth, the zlostas’s Fellblade began to glow. Slowly but surely, the weapon dissolved into thin air. A flicker of loss crossed his face, but only for a moment. Soon, his regret faded into an exhausted acceptance.

“Faithful to the end, eh?” he muttered.

Hiro could tell from Garda’s face that the Fellblade had abandoned him at last.

“Now you’re just like any other zlostas,” he said. “Although if your manastone is anything to go by, you can still take care of yourself.”

“Well? Have you humbled me enough yet?”

“I’m not gloating, if that’s what you’re asking. Your sword’s choices make no difference to me.”

With or without his Fellblade, Garda would play the same role in Hiro’s plans.

Hiro cast a glance over the soldiers. They were staring at him goggle-eyed, unsure of what to do. He idly wondered how long they meant to stay like that.

With a sigh, he addressed them. "I am Hiro Schwartz von Grantz of the line of the second emperor. As of several days ago, I am also fourth prince of the empire." His voice was not loud, but it carried, even above the din of battle. "As a member of the royal family, I have a duty to enforce the rule of law. Good Sir Edouard engaged in the gross mistreatment of a prisoner. I have punished him accordingly. If anybody here objects to his sentence, you may step forward now."

Neither was his voice especially sweet, but it held within it a power to command.

"Nobody? Good. Now, restrain those two, if you would."

Hiro indicated the men who had been Sir Edouard's partners in crime. Shock and dismay spread across their faces. They backed away, but the rest of the soldiers quickly detained them.

"Get your hands off me!"

"What have I done so wrong?! That fiendkin cut down my friends! Yours too!"

After executing Sir Edouard, Hiro could not afford to let these men off the hook. If his command was seen as inconsistent, it would harm morale and breed resentment in the ranks. It would be necessary to assign them a suitable punishment.

"Take them to the rear," he commanded. "The rest of you, spread word through the army that mistreatment of enemy captives will not be tolerated."

The soldiers sprang into action with lightning speed. As they scrambled to their duties, Hiro returned his gaze to Garda.

"Your girl should be here soon," he said.

"If you've harmed a single hair on her head, I'll take yours off."

"She means a lot to you. Can I ask why?"

Garda hesitated for a moment but decided there was no use playing coy. "It's not so easy for a zlostá to lead a human rebellion. She made a better leader.

One they could trust. Played the part happily for me too, though she did all the work and I reaped all the benefits. I meant to see her back to her hometown when this was all over. It was the least I could do, I thought. And now I can't even do that."

"Then I think I have a proposal for you."

"And what might that be?"

"If you swear to serve me, I'll make certain that she gets home safely."

Garda's forehead creased with suspicion.

"It's not a bad deal, if you ask me," Hiro continued. "If you're thinking about escaping with her, give it up. You don't stand a chance without your Fellblade. Although you don't seem like the type for pointless heroics anyway."

"And why should I take you at your word? Who's to say you'll hold up your end of the bargain?"

"I'll swear it on the Spirit King's name." Hiro glanced south as he spoke. A horse was approaching with Liz on its back.

The sixth princess tugged on the reins, bringing her mount to a stop before them. "I've got her," she said. A young girl sat in front of her on the saddle, swathed in a black cloak.

"Good work," Hiro said. "What's her name?"

The girl spoke for herself. "Mille, commander of the Liberation Army."

Hiro peered under her hood to get a better look at her face. He was immediately struck by a familiarity he couldn't quite place.

"Uncle Garda!"

As Hiro tried to remember where he might have seen her before, Mille leaped from the horse and flung her arms around the zlosta.

"Forgive me," Garda said. "I could not do as I promised."

Mille shook her head. "I'm just glad you're all right..."

"Nobody hurt you, did they?"

“No. The nice lady made sure they didn’t touch me.”

“Good.”

As the two took comfort in their reunion, Hiro turned to Liz. “Before we go any further, how are things on the front line?”

“By the time I made it there, only Mille and her guards were left.”

“That was all?”

“That was all.” Liz nodded. “The rest ran as soon as the fighting broke out, or so I heard. Apparently, the same thing happened to the rear guard. Half of the soldiers deserted, and the ones who were left couldn’t put up much of a fight.”

“Do you know where these deserters went?”

“East, I think.”

“Interesting.”

Hiro turned his gaze to the east. There, where the rear guard had fled, lay Fort Arzabah. A gentle incline blocked him from seeing any farther. He turned back to Garda.

“Tell me, did you use sellswords for your rear guard?”

The zlosta nodded. “Mostly. And a handful of freedmen.”

That clinched it. The ducal army must have bought out the rear guard. When and how they had managed it were questions for another day. The problem now was what to do about it.

“Liz, you command two thousand, don’t you? I’m guessing you left Tris in charge?”

“That’s right.”

Hiro gestured to two nearby cavalymen. The men snapped to attention.

“Yes, Your Highness!”

“I know you’re not messengers, but you’re all I’ve got. You, ride to the left flank and find Sir Tarmier. Instruct him to deploy his forces east. Tell him it’s on the orders of Lady Celia Estrella.”

“At once, Your Highness!” The first man rode off as fast as his steed could carry him.

“And you, ride to the core of the army and find General von Kilo. Tell him that the ducal army is coming from the east and he is to ready the reserves immediately. Make sure he understands that the fourth prince commands it.”

“Consider it done!” The second, too, departed.

With that, Hiro turned back to Liz. “And you...go and find Tris as fast as you can. I want you in command of the left flank.”

“And what will you do?” she asked.

“The ducal army is riding this way as we speak. I’m going to bloody their noses. Hopefully that will buy us some time.” Hiro hefted his standard and mounted his swiftdrake.

“And what of us?” Garda interjected.

“Mille will ride with Liz. You follow behind on camelback.” Hiro’s sword shimmered silver as it sliced through the zlosta’s bonds.

“You’d set me free? For all you know, I might kill your lady friend and make a run for it.”

“You’re no threat to Liz without your Fellblade. As I said, if you’re thinking about escaping with Mille, give it up.”

Besides, there was no guarantee that Garda would be safe if Hiro left him here. The zlosta’s escape was a risk, but so was his death. This was the best way. At least Hiro could feel confident that Garda would not run—not if it meant leaving Mille behind. Placing the girl into Liz’s keeping gave him some leverage over the zlosta. Garda would do as he asked.

“I won’t be long,” Hiro said.

Already, a cloud of sand was rising skyward from the other side of the eastern rise. Hiro’s lips pressed into a line as he spurred his swiftdrake across the desert.

The ducal army had advanced to within spitting distance of the battlefield. They numbered five thousand: two wings of camel riders, one thousand men apiece, with one thousand slaves leading the vanguard, and a core and rear guard comprising two thousand infantry.

Leading the army was the duke's second son, Karl Oruk Lichtein, with Marquis Rankeel Caligula Gilbrist as his vice-commander. The two men's faces were sour as they rode side by side.

"I took none of them for heroes," Rankeel scowled, "but I thought they'd have more steel than that."

On the previous day, the eleventh hour before the battle, a report had arrived from the north. A separate imperial force was burning towns and villages in the wake of the main army. Such tactics were to be expected, given how deep the imperials had plunged into enemy territory, but the nobles, growing fearful for their lands, had started clamoring for negotiation or surrender. The time Rankeel and Karl had needed to spare calming them down had delayed their advance.

"Spineless, the pack of them. They reap only what they have sown."

Rankeel's words were not entirely true—the nobles who had chosen war with the empire had perished in battle with the rebel army. Even so, surrender was out of the question, and negotiation would be impossible without first repelling the Fourth Legion. Maintaining Lichtein's integrity as a nation would require negotiating favorable terms. If they folded before even drawing swords, they would be the laughingstock of Soleil.

"The battle to come will decide everything, my lord."

Karl smiled. "I leave it in your capable hands."

As Rankeel nodded, a messenger ran up to him.

"My lord!" the man shouted. "Troops are approaching from the rebel army!"

"The sellswords, I presume. So they've managed to break away."

"Shall we add them to our ranks?" the messenger asked.

"No. Let them fight on their own."

The ducal army was already chasing lost time. Integrating the sellswords into their number would only slow them down further. Besides, Rankeel did not trust men who fought for gold. They cared nothing for their comrades or their homeland, only for lining their own pockets. Such men would desert at the drop of a hat, if they didn't stab their employers in the back first. To bring them into the ducal army's ranks would be asking for trouble.

"Bring me their leader," Rankeel continued. "I wish to know the state of the field."

"At once, my lord!" The messenger departed back down the road.

Before long, a man dressed in light armor rode up in his place. His garb was crusted with dried blood, and his grimy face was devoid of the slightest spark of intellect. He might as well have been a common bandit.

Rankeel looked the man over and frowned. On closer inspection, the sellsword was wearing the armor of the ducal army. The bloodstains were not new either; they were days old at the least. Knowing that this man had fought with the rebels, it was not hard to connect the dots: he had taken this armor from the same battlefield where Duke Lichtein had met his end. The realization was enough to disturb even Rankeel's composure. Fury began to boil in his breast.

"Thankee for your custom, sirs." The man rubbed the back of his head with a patently insincere smile, entirely oblivious to Rankeel's anger. He bobbed his head in acknowledgment.

Rankeel was tempted to cut the impudent lout down from his horse right then and there, but he took a deep breath and did his best to suppress the urge.

Karl, sensing Rankeel's disquiet, responded in his stead. "You have fought bravely, my friend. I am Karl Oruk Lichtein, and I would be honored to fight by your side."

The sellsword gave an unpleasant laugh. "And I yours. After the fat lot of gold you're payin' me, it's only right ye get your money's worth."

"How fares the battle?"

"Heh. Well, I can tell ye the rebels are takin' a real beating. Only a matter of

time afore they cave, I'd say."

"That bodes ill. We must hurry, Marquis."

Karl's words snapped Rankeel back to reality. He nodded. "Indeed we must. You, sellsword."

"What can I do for ye?"

"You and your men will lead the way. Our scouts have not yet covered the terrain. You must show us where to flank the Fourth Legion."

Karl cocked his head quizzically. Their scouts had been reporting regularly. They knew exactly where the battle was taking place.

"Can you do this?" Rankeel continued.

"Consider it done, sirs. They'll never know what hit 'em."

As the sellsword departed, Karl turned to Rankeel. "Why did you say that?"

"Why did I lie, you mean?"

"Exactly. That man was sneering at you behind his smile. I am certain he thinks our scouts are fools."

"I hope he does. He would not have agreed to lead the way otherwise."

"Is that worth shaming ourselves?"

"The fate of our homeland hangs in the balance. To fail it now on account of pride would be the greatest shame of all. Let idiots smile their vapid smiles if they wish."

Karl thought for a moment. "I see," he said finally. "You are a far better master of your emotions than I. If only I could restrain myself so easily."

Despite his words, Karl still seemed dissatisfied. The conversation fell into a lull.

Rankeel grunted. "Did you see the armor the lout was wearing? It was of ducal make."

"How could I not? It was filthy, but the design is distinctive. I suppose he must have bought it from some merchant."

“More likely he took it from a corpse, my lord. On the same battlefield that claimed the duke’s life.”

“Are you quite certain?”

“It was fine steel. I could not make out the crest beneath the grime, but its owner was likely a noble of some renown.”

“Disgraceful.” Karl scowled. “Once this war is won, I will see them duly punished.” He glared after the sellsword, though the man was no longer visible. His breathing grew heavy with anger, and his hands clenched tight on the reins.

“That’s why I’ll have them lead the way,” Rankeel said, as though to reassure him.

“Excuse me?”

“They will be first to the fray. If any return, we can sentence them then. In the meantime, they will serve us best as shields for imperial arrows.”

Karl grinned. “A fine plan!”

“Besides, my lord, I must correct you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said that I was master of my emotions. I assure you, I am not so noble.” Rankeel shrugged. “I am not immune to anger. I was sorely tempted to cut the man’s head from his shoulders. I did not, because even cravens such as he may serve a purpose, but I will not deny, it was to satisfy myself that I sent him to the front.”

Karl looked on, astonished, as a wicked smile spread across Rankeel’s face. So, even this man could lose his temper. “Still,” he said, “it takes a general to think to use the man. That would never have occurred to me. I would simply have killed him.”

Rankeel rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “You flatter me overmuch, my lord. Save your praise for after we have won this war.”

Karl nodded in assent. His anger finally seemed to be spent. “As you say. For now, victory is all that matters.”

With newfound resolve in his heart, Karl turned his gaze ahead. Rankeel nodded with satisfaction. The men rode on in silence, side by side.

Their peace of mind was short-lived, however. Before long, they noticed that the sellswords in front of them were acting strangely. The harsh clashing of swords rang distantly in the air, accompanied by ferocious battle cries. It was common practice among such men to shout and beat their shields with their swords to intimidate their enemies, but there should have been no such foe. The expected site of the battle was still some distance away.

As Rankeel's mind raced, a harried-looking messenger approached on horseback.

"Battle is joined, my lord!"

"Battle? What do you mean?" Rankeel peered ahead, frowning, but he could not make out the front line through the haze of dust and sand. "What are their numbers?"

The messenger hesitated. "Erm... One, my lord."

"What?" The word came unbidden from Rankeel's mouth. Surely the messenger must have misheard. His voice grew terse as he tried again. "I asked you how many men they have."

"One, my lord," the messenger repeated. "He appeared on the road to challenge the vanguard. The sellswords are engaging him as we speak."

"One man set himself against a thousand soldiers?"

Even if this mysterious warrior was trying to buy time, that was a fool's errand. What could one man do against an army? Perhaps it was an ambush; maybe he had more men waiting in the wings and he was plunging into the vanguard in a reckless gambit to divert the ducal army's attention. Rankeel considered the possibility for a moment, then dismissed it.

"No. Impossible," he said to himself.

If that was the Fourth Legion's plan, they wouldn't have been able to get their forces into position without being noticed. It would have been no small task to thwart the gaze of the ducal scouts, all the more so in the open desert.

Catching himself descending into confusion, Rankeel slapped his face to clear his mind. Confounding him like this was probably the enemy's intention. He grinned. If that was so, and the goal was to slow the ducal army's advance, this warrior had an impressive understanding of strategy.

"Clever. A lesser commander would have halted their march out of caution. Or, no... Perhaps this is my own prudence working against me."

"Is everything all right?" Karl looked at Rankeel, concerned.

Rankeel nodded. He spread his arms in a reassuring gesture. Whatever this enemy was scheming, he would thwart it. After all, what could one man do?

"Quite all right," he said. "We may continue our march. There will be no ambush."

His confidence would prove short-lived. Not long afterward, the vanguard ground entirely to a halt. Rankeel left Karl in the safety of the back lines and rode ahead.

"Have you taken leave of your senses?!" he bellowed to the men. "We have no time to stand around! March!"

Even as the words left his mouth, however, he became conscious of the pall of fear hanging in the air. The slaves' faces were pale. They looked so terrified, they might faint at any moment.

Rankeel approached their lines. "What happened here?!" he demanded.

A slave answered him in a voice that trembled with fear. "The... The Desperation..."

Cold fear settled in the pit of Rankeel's stomach. That word belonged to an old folktale, of the kind that parents told to frighten children who stayed up too late. None knew whence it originated, only that it had spread unseen far and wide, filtering down from noble to commoner to slave. Some said that it had first been told by a nameless bard; others, that it had sprung from the faerie tales of the Knightdom of Nala in the southwest of Soleil.

"The Desperation? That is a tale to frighten children! Have you lost your wits?!"

Rankeel masked his apprehension with ridicule, but alarm bells were ringing in his mind. His sweat ran far too cold for the desert heat, seeming to sap the warmth of his body. He gulped. With trepidation, he turned to the fore—and gasped. There, in the shimmering heat, a black shape was dancing.

Beckoning to him, luring him closer...

Cornix spread his wings over the battlefield.

The ancient faerie tales spoke of him: Cornix, the Midnight Crow, the lord of death and destruction who strove to lead the world to ruin. Or, to give him his other name: Varachiel, the Black God.

“It cannot be...” Rankeel breathed.

One sellsword fell to a swipe of those baleful wings, then another, and another. Blood sprayed skyward as the men collapsed, bleeding out into the sand. Tearful whimpers reached Rankeel’s ears. There were notorious marauders on this battlefield, no doubt; skilled swordsmen too; but before those dark wings, they were all as babes. The sellswords mustered what resistance they could, but they died in vain. Rankeel himself had plotted to send them to their deaths, but to see them cut down so callously, even he felt pity.

And yet, he could not bring himself to go to their aid. Fear of the apparition before him rooted him to the spot. As he stood frozen, his voice trapped in his throat, a severed head landed at his feet. It wore the face of the sellsword leader he had so despised.

Rankeel did not so much as glance down. His gaze was fixed on one detail of the scene, and one detail alone. His instincts screamed at him to keep his eyes on his enemy, but that was not the true reason. His mind was filled with what he had seen in the instant the boy in black had beheaded the sellsword—in the instant their eyes had met.

The boy was far away, so far that Rankeel could not even be certain he *was* a boy. To make out his expression from this distance should have been impossible. The sight must have been a mere vision his brain had shown him. The delusions of a mind possessed by fear.

But their eyes had met.

And Rankeel had seen the smirk on his lips.

The sellswords began to break and run. They fled toward the slaves' lines, crying for help.

"Loose arrows!" Rankeel shouted. "Don't let them get close!"

The archers were faithful to his command. More than a thousand shafts split the sky, carving long arcs to rain down on the remaining sellswords. They died in agony beneath the deluge. The volley fell on the boy, too, but he emerged unscathed.

"Monster!"

This horror must have been Varachiel himself, stepped straight out of myth. What else could it be if not that? Surely not a mortal man?

Only then did Rankeel see what was happening around him. The slaves were falling to their knees, begging the gods for forgiveness, repenting their sins. The vanguard's spirit was breaking.

"I will put a stop to this myself."

He focused his core to give himself strength, opened his mouth wide—and closed it again. The boy had turned away with a flick of his black mantle. This was their chance. Surely this boy could not avoid every arrow with his back turned. Nobody had eyes in the back of their head. At least this would show whether he was a monster or a man.

"Again!" Rankeel bellowed. "Fire!"

He flung his arm down toward the boy. Once more, the sky darkened with arrows. So dense was the downpour, even a mouse could not have escaped it, but the boy's mantle struck them all aside.

As Rankeel watched, aghast, a series of heavy thuds resounded from nearby. He looked around to see several slaves lying faceup on the sand, blood seeping from neat holes in their chests. The men did not even seem to realize how they had died. Their faces registered fear, despair, dreadful awe—but not pain. One might even have called them lucky to have passed so kindly.

A sharp pain lanced along Rankeel's cheek, breaking him from his fugue. He laid his hand to the source of the pain. It came away wet.

"Am I...bleeding? But why...?"

His trembling fingers were sticky with blood. He looked back up at the boy, but the dark figure was already gone. All that was left was a killing field strewn with the forlorn bodies of countless sellswords.

A hot, dry wind blew across the sand, restoring the warmth to his body. As the gears of his mind began to turn once more, a shudder of terror assailed him, so overwhelming that he wanted to scream. His heart pounded furiously in his ribcage. He pressed his fist against his chest, trying to calm its panicked beating.

"Hah..." He gave an empty chuckle. "So that must be the man in black."

He had heard the reports. He had simply assumed they were false—the desperate lies of inept nobles trying to shirk responsibility for a defeat that had claimed the lives of two of the duke's sons. He still could not credit them fully, even now, but after what he had seen, he could no longer dismiss them out of hand. That had been an error. He should have considered that they might hold a grain of truth.

It was no use lamenting the past, but now he needed to plan for the future. This man in black would need to be dealt with sooner or later. Rankeel would have liked to have investigated the man thoroughly, but that would have taken time the imperials would not allow them. Besides, the slaves were on their knees around him, quaking in terror as they whispered the names of the gods. The scars of this incident would impact their ability to fight.

"Maybe I can't kill him, but I can keep him pinned down. I'll show him that wars are won by armies, not men."

He would retreat for now. He could not risk his slaves abandoning their wits. Starting well meant everything in war. An unwise decision here might doom their prospects later, once the fighting began in earnest.

Marquis Rankeel sounded the retreat and returned to the rest of his army.

*

The Fourth Legion's left flank finished deploying eastward, but between the strain of their forced march and the exertion of the battle, their morale was phenomenally low. It was testament to their discipline that they organized into orderly ranks without complaint. Had they been conscripts, they would have formed up slower, and many would have deserted in fear.

As tension hung heavy in the air, the sixth princess assumed her command. The solar sheen of her crimson hair was dulled by sand and dust, but the loss of its luster did nothing to diminish her nobility. As compelling as Palladiana, her presence alone bolstered her soldiers' resolve.

Liz breathed a sigh, half exasperation, half affection. She might have been a wife awaiting her husband's return from the battlefield, or perhaps a mother looking out for her wayward child.

"He'll be okay, miss. He's strong. I can tell."

The girl in front of her was swathed in a large cloak that hid every inch of her olive skin. Even her face was invisible beneath the shadows of the heavy cowl. Although she was no longer the commander of the Liberation Army, many still bore her a grudge: the ducal forces would kill her if they got their hands on her, and the Fourth Legion had no love for her either. Accordingly, Liz had decided to accompany her, to protect her from anybody who might do her harm.

"I know," Liz replied, "but he's always so reckless. I just hope he hasn't gotten himself hurt."

"The whelp can take care of himself," Tris declared.

"Agreed. Although I would not blame you for doubting the word of an enemy." Garda stood by Tris's side. Outwardly, he appeared to be in his early twenties, but zlostas were long-lived—in truth, he was well over a hundred years old.

"But he's trying to stop a whole army by himself! Even for him, that's too much! I'm just so—"

Worried, Liz meant to say, but the word died in her throat. The very boy she had been so concerned for had finally returned. He was still some distance away, but even from there, she could see the fatigue on his face.

“Clear the way!” she commanded, picking up a waterskin. “Let him through!”

In short order, Hiro made his way over to her. She wordlessly handed him the waterskin. Hiro thanked her and set it to his lips, draining it in a single gulp.

Liz suddenly froze. She had handed him *her* waterskin—the same one she had drunk from over and over again. She connected the dots in her head and blushed as crimson as her hair, burying her head in her hands with a pained whimper.

Hiro watched her, perplexed, only to become aware of a murderous rage emanating from beside her. Tris was glaring a hole into him.

Hiro gulped. He offered the old soldier his most innocent smile, before wiping his mouth and looking around.

“Wait, is this all?” he asked.

“Eh?” Liz didn’t seem to understand. “Oh! Right! You’re thirstier than that! Hold on, I’ll be right back!” She started to turn her mount around.

“Huh? Wait!” Hiro hurriedly stopped her. “That’s not what I meant. I’m fine for water. I’ve still got some left.”

“I-I knew that! I was just messing with you!”

Liz let the reins drop and started kneading Mille’s head. The girl didn’t object at first, but eventually, being forcibly pushed to and fro grew too uncomfortable to bear.

“Miss, you’re hurting me.”

“Sorry! Sorry! I just thought you must be itchy in that!”

“I’m not, though.”

“Don’t be silly! Of course you are!”

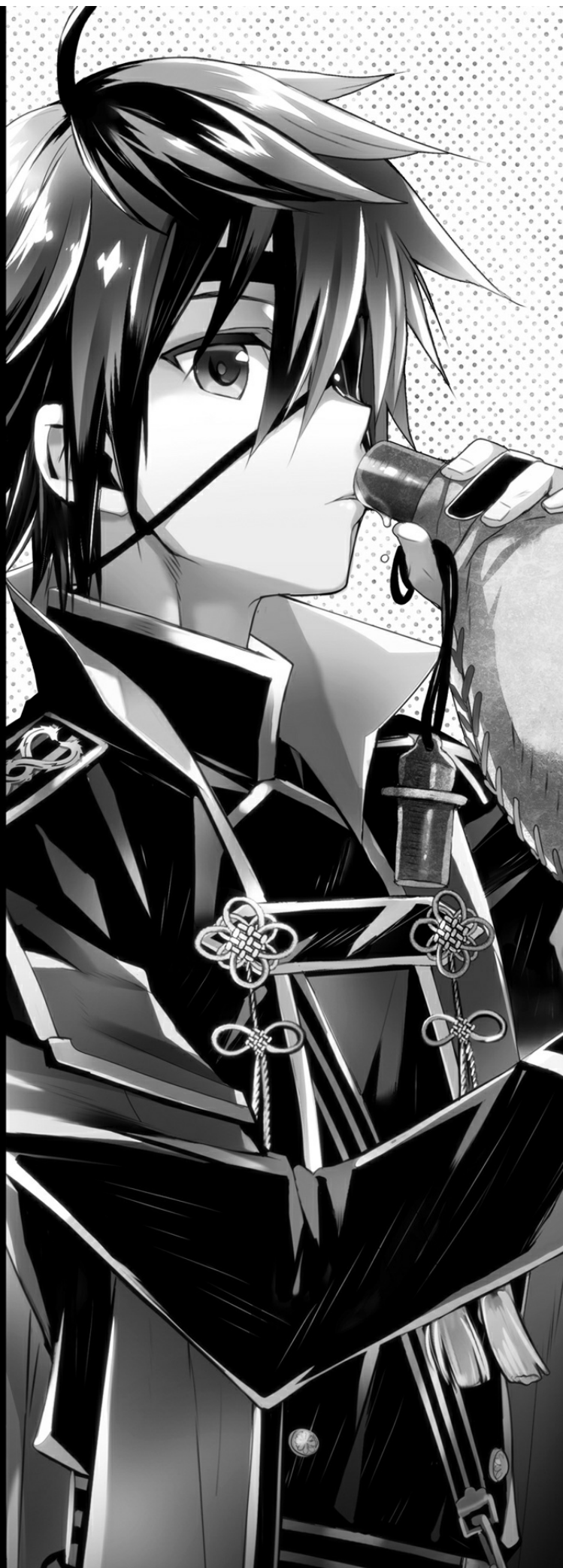
Despite Mille’s protests, Liz continued massaging her head. Hiro couldn’t see the girl’s expression beneath the hood but he could easily guess how she felt about the whole ordeal.

Unwilling to watch Liz embarrass herself any longer, Tris cleared his throat noisily. “I believe the boy meant to ask about our numbers, Your Highness.”

“Oh! Right! Of course! I knew that!” Liz released Mille’s head and thrust a finger toward Hiro. “It’s too hot today! Blame the sun!”

Hiro smiled awkwardly. “No, no, it’s my fault,” he said with a shake of his head. “I wasn’t exactly descriptive.”

“Will somebody tell these two we’re at war?” Garda muttered. Hiro pretended not to hear him.



“What I meant was, are these all the men we have? What happened to the reserves?”

Only the left flank had taken up defensive positions. Before leaving, Hiro had dispatched a man to General von Kilo asking him to ready the reserves, but not only were the reinforcements nowhere to be seen, the rest of the army seemed to be busy confiscating weapons from the prisoners and collecting them into piles. More than a few soldiers were lounging around, taking the weight off their feet.

“If this is all part of the plan, that’s one thing, but...”

It was possible this was all part of some elaborate ploy to make the army appear vulnerable, but the soldiers’ idleness seemed a little too believable for Hiro’s liking. He narrowed his eyes.

“You see...” Liz began, “General von Kilo said that I’m the commander here, so he’ll only listen to me, not the fourth prince.” She steepled her fingers apologetically. “I sent messenger after messenger, but all I got back was ‘two thousand cavalry will be more than enough for those untrained peasants.’ I tried, I really did, but he wouldn’t listen.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Hiro said. “There’s nothing you could have done.”

That came out blunter than he intended. Liz hung her head.

Tris’s fury was palpable. The old soldier seemed on the verge of drawing his sword, although Hiro didn’t dare ask whether it was General von Kilo’s audacity or his own lack of tact that had made the man so angry.

“Let’s speak with him,” Hiro said. “I owe him an introduction anyway, and it sounds like I’m not going to get anywhere near him without you with me. Could you help with that?”

“Of course!” Liz perked up instantly, delighted to be relied upon. A smile blossomed on her lips. Hiro breathed a silent sigh of relief.

“I’ll make sure to tell the general about all your good points!” Liz continued.

“Really, you really don’t have to...”

“Do you mean to take Mille with you?” Garda’s voice had an edge of concern.

“You do not make this von Kilo sound like a trustworthy man. I will not let you carry her into danger.”

“We’ll have to. Otherwise, what’s to stop you running off with her?” Liz’s gaze was cold as she stared at Garda, tinged with something that might have been hostility. “Don’t think I’ll ever forget how you used her. I won’t let you snatch her away to start another war.”

Garda shrugged, admonished. “The little lady has a sharp tongue.”

Mille’s face was hidden from the others, but from Hiro’s angle, he could just about make out her expression. The girl’s mouth was pursed in an unhappy little pout, but she was keeping silent. She seemed to see the sense in what Liz was saying. She had a good head on her shoulders, it occurred to him, especially for her age.

Hiro decided to move the conversation along before things came to blows. “Tris,” he said, “would you tell the soldiers to be at ease?”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” the old soldier asked. “For all we know, the enemy might be upon us at any moment.”

“They’re more likely to attack if they see that we’re the only ones ready. They’ll realize there’s been a communication breakdown.”

The old soldier pondered that for a moment. “Aye,” he said finally, “but if they see us lounging about unprepared, what’s to stop them trying their luck anyway?”

“They might under a headstrong commander, but our enemy is too cautious for that. Let him waste time thinking himself in circles. Our soldiers need the rest, and so do our horses.”

Hiro’s assault had made the enemy wary. The ducal army would tread much more carefully now, unless the imperial forces made an obvious blunder. General von Kilo’s refusal to send the reserves had been a failure on his part, but it had still served to sow suspicion among the enemy.

With Tris satisfied, Hiro patted his swiftdrake’s head. “I should be off. I’ll let you take care of things here.”

“Aye, I’ll see it done. Give the general an earful for me, would you?” Tris saw Hiro off with a hearty wallop on the back—an old-fashioned show of encouragement that nonetheless drove the breath from his lungs. Coughing, Hiro set out for the heart of the army.

*

The sun shone fiercely down over the heart of the Fourth Legion’s forces, but the mood was cheerful. Soldiers bantered and laughed between themselves. To look at the merry scene, one would never have thought the enemy lurked just out of sight.

A canvas tent had been set up in the center to ward against the sand. Inside stood a plain table with General von Kilo and his advisors arrayed around it, poring over the map laid out on top.

“Our scouts report that the ducal army has fallen back. They have taken up position here.” One of the advisors placed a pawn on the map. “They appear to be sending out scouts, just as we are. We should assume that they have a good idea of our overall positions.” The man looked up at General von Kilo. “Are you certain it was wise not to send the fourth prince his reinforcements, sir?”

“I have no obligation to listen to this supposed fourth prince. He could be anybody. For all we know, that letter might have been the work of an enemy spy.”

“The ducal army has been seen in the area, sir. If they attack in numbers, two thousand men will struggle to hold them off.”

“You worry too much. Kigui would not have bothered me with this prattle.”

When the general had learned of his vice-commander’s death at the zlosta’s hands, he had been almost incoherent with rage. The intervention of his advisors had only barely been enough to calm him down.

“This supposed fourth prince carries the second emperor’s standard, does he not?”

“So I have heard, sir.”

“Well, there is your answer. If he is a true scion of Emperor Schwartz, he will

give us a display worthy of his forefather's name."

"Unrivaled on earth with one thousand, unrivaled in heaven with ten, the War God's machinations rule the world entire.' Do you mean those words, sir?"

"Indeed. An absurd fable but perhaps he can live up to it. With two thousand men, he should be doubly unrivaled on earth." The general chuckled with unconcealed contempt.

The advisor's eyebrows arched slightly, but otherwise he continued unperturbed. "The myths may be exaggerated, sir. Besides, what if he truly is who he claims? Many worship the War God, not only among the people but among our own men. If this were to get out, it may threaten your position." He did not say as much, but from his tone, he too seemed to be one of the War God's faithful.

General von Kilo's smile vanished, replaced by anger. "Enough. Drix, what rank are you?"

"Second Class Military Tribune, sir."

"I see. You may leave." Von Kilo gestured to the door with a dismissive wave. "Return when you have calmed your temper. The air here seems not to agree with you."

"As you command, sir."

Drix turned and made his way to the exit. The other advisors watched sympathetically as he went. As he tried to leave, however, he found that he could not.

"You may stay, Second Tribune Drix."

A girl blocked his way. A girl with crimson hair—the Valditte, the Princess of Flame. The advisors bowed their heads as one. Even General von Kilo forced a smile.

"May I ask what brings you here, Your Highness?" he said with barely concealed displeasure. "I was led to believe that you had taken it upon yourself to prepare for battle."

Liz's brow furrowed. "That's why I'm here. We've asked you several times to

ready the reserves. Why haven't you sent us any reinforcements?"

"Because I command this army and you do not. That is the only reason that matters." As General von Kilo smirked, he seemed to notice the boy at the princess's side for the first time. "As for whoever this is, only those with permission may attend my strategy meetings. Your royal blood does not grant you *carte blanche* to defy regulations."

On closer inspection, the boy was not the princess's only attendant. A hooded figure stood behind her back. Von Kilo could not discern their gender beneath their heavy cloak, but judging by the short stature, it must have been either a woman or a child. He glared at the trio with distaste.

"If you were soldiers under my command, I would consider this gross insubordination and deal with it accordingly. I cannot punish a member of the royal family, alas. Still, I encourage you to exercise more discretion in future." He waved them away as though shooing off a dog. "If there is nothing else, you may return to your posts. I have no time to entertain children."

"With all due respect—" Liz began, but a hand on her shoulder stopped her short.

"Hold on, Liz," the boy said. "I'll deal with this."

General von Kilo's eyes narrowed with suspicion at the sound of the princess's nickname, but before he could address it, the boy approached.

"General von Kilo, I assume? It's a pleasure to meet you."

Black hair and black eyes, the rare combination known as *twinblack*. Neither trait existed naturally in Aletia. Even more curiously, more than half of the boy's face was obscured by an enormous eyepatch. Dressed in his black garb, he was the spitting image of Mars as described in the empire's myths.

"I am Hiro Schwartz von Grantz, fourth prince of the empire." Hiro extended his right hand to shake, then stopped himself. "Oh, do excuse me. I forgot I was only a third rank tribune." He glanced pointedly at Drix, who was halfway out of the tent. "I assume you do not shake hands with lower ranks."

"Of course I do," von Kilo finally stammered. He accepted the handshake, although the gleam of suspicion in his eyes remained as strong as ever. "Pardon

my rudeness, but do you carry any proof of your identity?”

“My hair and my eyes should do...or so I should think, but I suppose they could be disguised. This can’t be faked, though.” Hiro patted the chest of his overcoat.

Immediately, the hem of the Black Camellia sharpened into spear-like points that sped toward von Kilo. So sudden was the attack that he could only flinch away, tripping backward and coming down hard on the floor. The impact knocked the breath from his lungs. His soldier’s training paid off as he scrambled back to his feet again, but his chest was heaving and his face was twisted in pain.

“Have you lost your mind?!” he wheezed.

Seeing the general fly into a rage, the advisors reached for their swords.

“Sorry about that,” Hiro said. “The Black Camellia can be irritable when she’s in a bad mood. I should warn you, she’s easily frightened. If you draw your swords, she might start to panic, and then even I won’t be able to stop her.” He looked over the advisors, a smile playing on his lips. “Unless you don’t believe me?”

Nobody dared take him up on his offer. Hearing the Black Camellia’s name, all of their gazes converged on Hiro’s garb, even at the expense of its wearer. None since the second emperor had been permitted to wear the *regalía*. They were awestruck to see it up close.

Sensing the hostility fade from the air, Hiro reached into his pocket and produced a scroll. “If the Black Camellia isn’t enough, this should convince you.”

General von Kilo approached warily. It was almost comical to see him so easily stripped of his arrogant bluster—not that one could blame him after his recent brush with death. His brow creased as he took the scroll, recognizing it as a missive from the emperor. His face visibly paled as he read. At last, he looked up again, his eyes wide with shock.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Hiro patted the man on the shoulder, then retrieved the letter and rolled it up. “In the event that your abilities are found wanting, His Majesty the Emperor

commands you to yield leadership of the army to me. Personally, I would place Lady Celia Estrella in command with me as her aide, but—”

“This is absurd!” von Kilo interrupted, trembling with anger. “I will not yield my command to...to a stripling like you!”

“Not to me. To Lady Celia Estrella.”

“There is no difference!” The unpleasantly sticky air only grew hotter with the general’s rage. He was more irate now than he had been after the Black Camellia’s attack. His advisors shied away, watching the confrontation nervously.

Hiro shrugged dismissively, placing a finger to his lips. “That’s enough. Throwing a tantrum won’t change anything. Accept it and move on.”

“Wha—?” Von Kilo struggled for words. “I will not be patronized by anyone, least of all by you!”

“I said that’s *enough*.”

A silver streak rent the air. In an instant, there was a sword at von Kilo’s neck. The man whimpered.

“I have given you every chance to prove your worth, but you have made yourself a burden at every opportunity. I will not tolerate your bumbling presence any longer.”

“You dare...!”

“I will decide what to do with you at a later date. We have more pressing concerns at the moment.” Hiro sheathed Excalibur and swept his gaze over the advisors. “And as for the rest of you—by failing to rein in your commander, you have made yourselves complicit. I have no need for a retinue of yes-men.”

Although he was younger than them in years, he radiated the authority of a battle-hardened veteran. The advisors gulped. They mumbled their apologies, blanching with fear.

General von Kilo, for his part, seemed stupefied. Watching his ambitions go up in smoke was certainly doing him no favors, but it seemed to be Hiro’s condescension that had dealt the most damage.

As the man stood dazed, Hiro landed the final blow. “You may leave. Return when you have calmed your temper.”

Von Kilo’s face flushed beet red. Wordlessly, he collapsed.

“General?! General!”

“To the medic, quickly!”

Two advisors hoisted him onto their shoulders and carried him away. Hiro had not expected von Kilo to literally faint from outrage, but no permanent damage seemed to have been done. He glanced at Liz, who nodded and approached the table.

“Let’s get this meeting underway,” she said. “Don’t hold back. I want to hear your honest opinions.”

The advisors straightened, and their faces took on a newfound sobriety.

With the meeting over, Hiro stepped out of the tent and into dazzling sunlight. Soldiers were dashing to and fro by the hundreds. Sand rose into the air from their harried footsteps, which the wind bore away as it passed, toying with the standard-bearers’ banners and plucking playfully at the hem of Hiro’s overcoat. As he watched the flags flutter in the breeze, it struck him that a change had come over them.

“That was quick work,” he mused.

All of General von Kilo’s livery had been taken down, replaced by a lily on a crimson field—the colors of the sixth princess. The change of standards signified that Liz had taken formal command. Still, the greatest task still lay ahead of them: winning the battle. Without victory, their coup would be meaningless.

“Hiiirooo!”

As Hiro stood lost in thought, someone flung their arms around him from behind. There were no prizes for guessing who. He smiled affectionately.

“What’s gotten into you?”

Liz pouted. “We haven’t seen each other in ages! You could at least act happy to see me.” She squeezed a little harder, making her displeasure known.

“Of course I’m happy. I’m glad you’re safe.”

“I want a bit more enthusiasm out of you, mister. You barely say anything unless you’re spoken to. Try expressing yourself better. If you aren’t good at saying, try doing!”

Liz seemed to be in a touchy-feely mood, but Hiro was painfully aware of the soldiers’ stares. As he shrank under their gazes, Liz began rubbing her cheek on his neck. She didn’t seem to mind the attention.

“Could you stop?” he asked, as politely as he could. “People are staring.” It wasn’t unpleasant but it was embarrassing.

Liz pulled away. “Fine, then. We can pick this up later!”

She had seemed so single-minded one second, only to change tack completely the next. She really was as fickle as a cat.

“That’s not what I... Wait, what’s that supposed to mean?”

But Hiro was too late. Liz had already flounced off with Mille in tow. She joined a group of soldiers who were busy filling sacks with sand.

“Come on, everyone! I know you’re tired, but just a little more!”

“Your Highness,” the commanding officer protested, “you needn’t trouble yourself—”

“I know, but I want to. Don’t worry about me, just keep working.”

“As you command.” Defeated, the officer turned to the rest of his men and raised his voice. “Put your backs into it, you laggards! Every grain you don’t collect is one you leave to our princess!”

As Hiro watched, smiling wryly, he noticed a figure standing off to the side. He approached and offered a greeting. “Do you have a moment?”

“Y-Your Highness?! Whatever do you want with me?!”

The man snapped bolt upright. It was the advisor named Drix—the one who had dared to contradict General von Kilo and almost been expelled from the meeting for his trouble. Only Liz’s timely arrival had saved him from punishment.

It seemed to be less Hiro's royal titles that were making Drix nervous and more his status as the scion of the second emperor. He offered the man a smile to soothe his nerves. A pat on the shoulder encouraged him to stand at ease.

"There's something I want you to do for me," Hiro said. "Something in addition to our official plans."

Hiro had used the meeting to order an immediate retreat. The work that Liz and the soldiers were engaged in now was part of that plan—one of several contingencies he had included in case the enemy deduced their intentions. Technically, it would be possible to win without falling back, but standing their ground would cost them in lives. Hiro would settle for nothing less than a complete victory, for utterly breaking the enemy's spirits and laying a firm foundation for the future to come.

"What would you have me do?" Drix asked.

"Could you bring me General von Kilo's private reports?"

Drix's eyes narrowed slightly. He seemed to understand what Hiro was getting at. "Of course, Your Highness. I will see it done forthwith."

Once Drix had departed, Hiro resumed walking, meaning to pitch in with Liz and the soldiers. Leaders could not expect to be respected simply for giving orders; they had to set an example for others to follow. That was true in all walks of life, not just in the military, but it was especially vital now, when they were so deep in enemy territory. He would have to take care to eat only once his men had eaten and perform his duties without complaint. The simplest things could have an enormous effect on morale, and though their impact was invisible, it could make the difference between victory and tragedy.

"Mind if I join in?" he asked.

Liz turned from her work. She wiped the sweat from her brow and cocked her head. "Don't you have other things to do?"

"I've notified the officers of the change of command and made sure they have their orders. Everything seems to be going smoothly—well, to my eyes, anyway, if you catch my meaning. I'm just waiting on the scouts' reports."

He had been somewhat surprised to learn that Liz had been in quiet contact

with almost every officer in the army. It was hard to know whether he had truly won the men's hearts after his coup, but in any case, their loyalty to her had ensured their obedience to him. As to whether they would follow his orders once things got messy, only time would tell. In any case, his only outstanding business was dealing with the scouts' reports; until they returned, his time was his own.

Liz didn't seem pleased to hear that, however. "We'll need you in good shape. You should be trying to save all the strength you can. After all the fighting you've done, you must be exhausted."

Hiro shrugged. "I'd be lying if I said I'm not, but I can't be the only one with my hands free."

Liz's eyebrows knotted in concern. "All right, fine. I've half a mind to put you to bed myself, but you'd probably only sneak back out again. You're better off where I can see you."

"Hey, now. I'm not a kid."

"Oh, really? Then why do you wander off the moment I take my eyes off you?"

"You know what, I should get started. Sorry, can't talk!"

That was quite enough prodding this particular hornet's nest. Hiro cut the conversation short and pitched in with the soldiers. For a while, he worked in silence.

After some time, a scout ran up to him. "Lord Hiro. I have returned from the enemy lines."

"Good work." Hiro handed the scout a waterskin and waited for the man to catch his breath.

"It is as you foresaw, Your Highness. The morale of the enemy slaves is flagging."

"Do you think they could launch an offensive?"

"Not the slaves. They have been sent to the rear. The enemy has brought their camel riders to the fore, ready to charge at a moment's notice."

“So they’re looking for an opening to strike.”

“I believe so, Your Highness.”

“But it doesn’t sound like they’ve committed to their plan, and we’re almost ready ourselves. I say we spook them a little.”

Hiro raised a hand, signaling the drumbearers. The men struck their instruments with all their might. Thunderous drumbeats shook the air, a wave of sound that rolled over the rest of the army.

The left flank’s cavalry were the first to move, advancing east. The right flank’s cavalry circled around to join them. Hiro hefted the fruits of his labor onto his back and mounted his swiftdrake.

“Remember, Liz, just like we discussed.”

“I know,” Liz replied. “Take care, okay?”

“I will. I’m counting on you.”

With Liz’s voice echoing behind his back—“It’s time, everyone! Let’s get a move on!”—Hiro and his swiftdrake made their way east.

“Even the wind’s on our side.”

He listened to the beating of the drums and smiled.

*

The beating of the Fourth Legion’s drums had plunged the ducal army’s encampment into disarray.

“We’re under attack! The enemy is coming!”

“Send the slaves to the fore! Make a wall! The archers too, fill them full of arrows!”

Marquis Rankeel ground his teeth in chagrin as he watched the nobles descend into panic. “They’re running rings around us.”

When he had learned of the Fourth Legion’s change of command shortly prior, his first thought had been to gauge his new opponent. He had moved his camel riders to the fore and waited to see how the imperials would respond. When the enemy did nothing, he had concluded that he faced an inattentive

commander and started organizing raiding parties—and at exactly that moment, the enemy cavalry had begun to move.

“And they have momentum in their favor.”

The enemy had timed their move perfectly. If this was the sixth princess’s work, she was a commander to be feared, and if it wasn’t, she had a capable advisor at her side. That was the privilege of being rulers of the continent: the empire had its pick of the best minds in every field. Still, this was no time for admiration.

“Stay calm! Deploy the camel riders to the flanks!” Rankeel commanded. He had no idea how the enemy would approach, but he could not risk being surrounded. “Archers to the fore! This is our chance! They’re riding right into our laps!”

As the words left his mouth, his blood ran cold. The man in black was leading the charge. “So you’ve shown your face,” he muttered.

The wounds this man had dealt had still not healed. Word of what had happened to the slaves must have spread; even the ordinary soldiers wore masks of terror. He would need to rally them. *At least you’ll serve our purposes in death*, he thought grimly as he marshaled his resolve.

“Nock arrows!”

As he gave the command, the enemy cavalry began to act oddly. They spread out sideways and scattered. The maneuver whipped up a cloud of dust, filling the air with an impenetrable brown haze.

“Blast it. We’re downwind...”

The cloud obscured the enemy soldiers, reducing them to battle cries and thundering hoofbeats. That boded ill. The one silver lining was that the dust also concealed the man in black. Thanks to that, most of the ducal soldiers remained ignorant of his presence.

“If they mean to surround us while we’re blinded, they’re taking us for fools.”

Rankeel looked over his forces. “Left flank, right flank, advance! First cohort, fall back!” he bellowed. Let the imperials come. It would be them who would

find themselves surrounded. In eager anticipation, he waited for the enemy to emerge from the cloud...but they never did.

“Where are they?”

Something was wrong. The drumbeats, the battle cries, and the thundering of hooves all continued, but...

“They’re...receding?”

By the time Rankeel realized that he had been deceived, it was too late. The dust cloud cleared to reveal...nothing. He began to wonder what the enemy hoped to gain from their trick, but a panicked cry from the soldiers forced him to abandon his train of thought.

“I-It’s the man in black! He’s here!”

A wave of dismay sped through the army as the shout went up from the front lines.

“It can’t be...” Rankeel whispered.

The enemy was giving him no time to think. Even as Rankeel looked up in surprise, chaos and confusion were spreading through the ducal army’s ranks. The soldiers were petrified. Rankeel rubbed his forehead, feeling a headache coming on. He followed his men’s gaze. A man in black garb was standing stock-still in the distance.

A vision of a thousand slain soldiers passed through Rankeel’s mind at the sight. His body began to tremble of its own accord. Still, he was not foolish enough to succumb to fear. He slapped his cheek to clear his head, took a breath, and spoke.

“Order in the ranks! You have nothing to fear from one man!”

“But sir!” a cry came back. “That one man slew a thousand!”

“Stand firm, soldier. I have a plan for him.”

To deal with the man in black, Rankeel had assembled a hundred of the army’s finest. He was not optimistic enough to think they could kill him—not when he could fight a thousand men and win—but at least they could slow him down. If he could only keep the man in black preoccupied, the exhausted

Fourth Legion would crumble. The enemy was one man against an army. He could not be everywhere at once.

“I’ll see you pay,” Rankeel muttered grimly. He drew his sword from his belt and gestured toward the standard-bearer. His chosen hundred camel riders moved forward. The rest of the army resumed their advance, keeping a wary distance.

“Once the vanguard engages the man in black, we will fall on the Fourth Legion,” he called to a messenger. “Until then, we follow them to disguise our intentions.”

“I will tell the officers, sir.”

“See it done.”

Time passed, but no battle broke out. As Rankeel was starting to grow suspicious, the messenger returned from the front.

“It’s a decoy, sir! The man in black is a decoy!”

“What do you mean, a decoy?”

“He’s nothing but black cloth over logs, sir.” The messenger shrugged an object from his back with a thud. True to his word, it was nothing but wooden logs bound to a sack of earth, draped with black cloth to give it the semblance of a man.

“Impossible. Ridiculous...” The sight was so absurd, Rankeel struggled for words. Had fear so paralyzed his mind that he had mistaken this scarecrow for the real thing? That he had fallen for this childish trick?

“There are more, sir. Lots more.”

“Excuse me?”

They crested the rise to find themselves at the same site where the Fourth Legion had clashed with the rebel army. The battlefield was an enormous basin where one could look down from all sides. Among the scattered corpses, wooden scarecrows draped with black fabric stood like gravestones.

“The bastard’s making fools of us.”

Childish though it may have been, the trick had worked. The entire ducal army knew the man in black's power, and there was no telling whether the real thing might be hidden among the duplicates. His men were no doubt thinking the same thing. He could see it in the hesitance of their advance.

"Do they have us surrounded or are they simply covering their retreat? Either way, to think I would be so outclassed..."

Rankeel could see the Fourth Legion falling back on the other side of the graveyard. It was a tempting sight, but it was bait nonetheless. To pursue them would require proceeding through the basin. If there really was an enemy ambush waiting in the wings, ceding the high ground would not be merely disadvantageous, it would be lethal—and all the more so if the man in black was hiding among his lookalikes. They would be riding to certain defeat.

"We could march around, but even then..."

Not only would that give the enemy time to prepare, but the ducal army would run the risk of entering battle with their ranks not fully rejoined. The enemy commander had planned for every scenario. It was nothing short of exquisite strategy.

"They use our own land against us as though they were born here. Anyone would think we were facing Mars himself."

With a self-deprecating chuckle, Rankeel looked up at the sky. The veil of night was setting in. They could no longer afford to wait for the favor of the heavens. Along that path lay ruin.

A shadow fell over his face. The road to victory had never seemed so dark. His men's fighting spirit was waning and their morale was flagging. If he couldn't find a way out of this quagmire soon, they would all drown in it.

An invisible wall seemed to stretch before him, tall and broad and impassable.

Chapter 5: The War God's Machinations

As the sun sank below the horizon, the desert winds relinquished their scorching heat in favor of a bitter chill. Countless bonfires illuminated the night, spaced through the miniature city of over five hundred tents that was the Fourth Legion's encampment. In the center rose a tent twice as large as any of the rest, marked with standards bearing a lily on a crimson field. Its mistress was absent tonight. The sixth princess was out among her troops, busily trying to raise morale.

A short distance away, within another tent, a meeting was in progress. Hiro sat at the head of a long table. General von Kilo and the advisors who had served under his command occupied the rest of the chairs.

Hiro spoke first. "No doubt you all have some idea why I have gathered you here," he said, thumping the stack of reports by his side for emphasis.

The advisors paled. None dared raise their heads. They knew what was coming.

"General von Kilo."

The man looked up in alarm. He didn't seem to have expected that his name might be the one called. "Yes?"

"It is written here that you ordered several units to ransack nearby settlements for supplies."

"Procuring supplies from enemy lands is a basic element of warfare."

"In exchange for fair payment, yes. Pillaging is a weak man's tactic."

"Pretty ideals don't win wars. Other nations do the same."

"But we are the Grantzian Empire, and we take pride in our military discipline. Something our commanders must take particular care to uphold. By your actions, you have betrayed our most fundamental values." Hiro's voice was cold. "As such, I hereby strip you of the rank of general."

“By what right?!” von Kilo protested. “Prince or not, you have no authority to order such a thing!”

“True enough, but the Ministry of Military Affairs does. And they will once I notify them of your conduct.”

“Y-You wouldn’t...!”

“If you wanted to stop me, I suppose you would have to dispose of me before I send the letter. I would recommend poison, although there’s nothing wrong with a good old-fashioned knife in the dark.”

“I would never consider such a thing, Your Highness.” Von Kilo’s face stiffened like that of a man caught red-handed. Clearly, he had very much been considering such a thing. Hiro suppressed a smirk as he nodded in acknowledgment. He was easy to read, this man.

“My apologies. That was in bad taste. Please ignore it.”

“I would never stoop to such cowardly methods. I would appreciate it if you did not insinuate otherwise.”

“A man of your virtues? Perish the thought.” Hiro switched tack from barbs to praise. “Now, I’m certain it hasn’t escaped your notice that the men gathered here are your most faithful advisors.”

Apparently, it had. Von Kilo’s eyes widened as he looked around. “So I see.”

“I trust you have some idea of where this is going.”

“B-But of course.” He clearly did not. He was visibly confused and struggling to meet Hiro’s gaze.

Hiro decided to feed the man the answer, marveling at his denseness. “But perhaps you want to hear it out loud.” He raised one finger with a smile. “If you do as I tell you, I’ll be willing to pardon you.”

“Pardon?”

“If you perform well enough, I would even be willing to recommend your reassignment to the central provinces. That is to say, I would put you forward for the position of high general. It’s not a bad deal, if you ask me.”

“Do you speak truly?”

“It would be a waste to leave a man of your talents to rot in some border province.” Hiro shook his head with a theatrical sigh. “Unfortunately, your indiscretions are beyond my power to downplay. It seems that the men you chose for the task have been talking.”

Von Kilo’s face fell. “I see.”

“With that in mind, I must ask you to lead the advance guard in tomorrow’s battle.”

“The advance guard?” Trepidation spread across von Kilo’s face. The mortality rate on the front lines was high—all the more so for commanders, who would draw the enemy’s attention. This was not an offer anybody would agree to lightly...or at least, not without a nudge.

“We have numbers on our side. You have nothing to fear. I do not intend to truly risk your life. This is all for a purpose: I need you to distinguish yourself. Our victory tomorrow is all but certain, but it will be difficult to justify your advancement if you remain on the back lines.”

“There is sense in that,” von Kilo conceded.

“Believe me when I say that the empire needs a man like you in a high general’s seat...as do I.”

The man hesitated. “I trust that His Majesty will hear of my valor?”

“You have my word,” Hiro promised.

He will hear of your valiant death on the field, he added silently, but he said nothing more, only extended his hand with an amiable smile.

Von Kilo eagerly accepted the handshake. “Then I will strive to acquit myself.”

“I’m glad to have eased your concerns. Here’s to letting bygones be bygones.”

“Indeed.”

Hiro took his seat again and addressed the rest of von Kilo’s advisors, who had been watching in silence. “I would also like you to join the advance guard. Is that acceptable?”

With von Kilo's agreement secured, they could hardly refuse, but they needed an extra push. Hiro gave it to them.

"In two months' time, you will all return to the capital as heroes."

That convinced them at last. Slowly, the advisors began to nod. Try as he might, Hiro could not suppress the smallest of grins. He scratched his eyepatch to disguise it. "Now, I must insist that you rest. You will need all your strength for the battle tomorrow."

"As you command, Lord Hiro," von Kilo replied. "We will win glory, I swear it!" He exited the tent. His advisors followed suit.

Hiro's eyes flicked to a shadowy corner of the now empty tent. The figure of a man melted out of the darkness to take the form of Drix, von Kilo's former advisor. He approached Hiro and dropped to one knee.

"Our spies have successfully infiltrated the enemy encampment. As you commanded, I have also readied fifteen hundred camels on the outskirts of the camp."

"Excellent. How are our own defenses?"

"In good order. Secure in most locations except for several deliberate holes."

"Have any enemy spies snuck in?"

"Four, sir, at last count."

"Have your men detain them."

"It will be done."

"Wait," Hiro ordered as the man turned to leave.

"Is there something else, sir?"

"Spread word among the soldiers that von Kilo and his lapdogs are resting on the eve of battle."

"As you command." Judging by Drix's expression, he had intended to do so anyway. The man excused himself.

At last, Hiro was truly alone. He heaved a sigh and closed his eyes. Word that von Kilo was sleeping while his soldiers toiled would spread like wildfire. Not

only would it sink the man's reputation, it would shore up that of Liz, who was working tirelessly to maintain her soldiers' spirits. Her detractors would dwindle and morale would rise. She gave the army a common cause to rally around. Every man would fight like hell for his princess.

"Now I just have to cull her enemies."

Hiro stood and left the tent. The nighttime breeze ruffled the bonfires as it swooped low to caress his cheeks. After a short walk, he arrived at Garda's makeshift cell. A group of soldiers stood watch outside the tent. Hiro took care to praise their vigilance as he stepped inside.

Garda raised his head as he registered Hiro's presence. "You're alone?"

"Of course. We have important things to discuss. We can hardly open up to one another with other people around."

The zlosta snorted humorlessly. "If you opened yourself up, I wager I'd find nothing but a heart as black as pitch."

"That's not very nice of you."

"Before I say more, Mille is safe, I trust?"

"As safe as she can be. She's posing as Liz's lady-in-waiting."

"Very well, then. As long as she'll not come to harm. What is it you wish to discuss?"

Hiro stared at Garda in silence for a moment, then reached out and cut the man's bonds.

Garda looked down at the fallen ropes, then back up at Hiro with suspicion in his eyes. "What is the meaning of this?"

"We can't speak comfortably with one of us tied up."

"You're a strange one. Most men would take more care around a prisoner."

"I'll take that as a compliment." Hiro sat down on the ground and produced a bottle of drink from inside his overcoat.

"Interesting trick," Garda remarked.

Hiro shrugged. "You'd be surprised what I can fit in my pockets." He tossed

the bottle to Garda.

The man cocked his head. "Not drinking?"

"I'm afraid I don't. It's not poisoned or anything, if that's what you're worried about."

"I never fancied it was. If you wanted to kill me, you'd take my head and be done with it. No need for such silly games." Garda popped open the bottle and took a hearty swig. "Well, out with it. What quandary have you brought me now?"

"I want the Liberation Army to fight for me tomorrow."

Garda seemed to have been expecting the request. "You want two armies who've never fought together to stand side by side, eh? We'll only trip over one another's feet. What are you scheming?"

Hiro ignored the zlosta's gaze hardening. "Let's just say I'm looking to minimize my losses."

"So you'll make us fight in your place? If you make shields of my men, they won't just run, they'll turn on you."

"Don't worry, you won't be first into the fray. The Fourth Legion's advance guard will handle that. They're about a thousand strong."

"Hmm."

"And I'll see you rewarded for your trouble. Once the fighting is done, I'll release your freedmen. The sellswords too. I'll even find you land to start new lives."

"A tempting offer. Too tempting not to come at a price."

"It's nothing too steep."

"I'll be the judge of that." Garda placed the bottle down and fixed Hiro with a steady gaze, scrutinizing his every move.

Hiro produced a sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it to Garda. "Once the fighting begins in earnest, I want you to slip into the chaos and kill von Kilo, the commander of the advance guard, and his followers. All the

specifics are here.”

Garda stared for a moment. “You must have lost your mind.”

“I’d prefer you to wipe out all one thousand if you could, but at the very least, I need these men dead.”

“And what did they do to deserve this?”

“Von Kilo has committed crimes too severe to go unpunished.”

“Burned one too many towns, you mean?”

“You knew?”

Von Kilo’s reports had detailed his campaign of raids against the surrounding settlements. Even the units who had performed the task were listed, presumably in the hopes of receiving a reward. Those same soldiers now made up the advance guard—all the easier to wipe them out in one fell swoop.

“You get to hear these kinds of things when you command an army.”

“Then I’m sure you’ll agree with me when I say...” Hiro’s mouth was smiling, but his eyes were hard, and his face was a spine-chilling mask. “...that those who harm the innocent do not deserve to live.”

For a long moment, silence fell over the tent. Garda lowered his eyes. He picked up the bottle and sighed. “If you want the man dead, why not execute him yourself?”

“Believe me, I’d love to, but having his blood on my hands would only cause me trouble down the road.”

Von Kilo’s house, House Nikkel, was one of the more powerful families in the southern territories. Executing their head might earn the ire of all the southern nobles. For the moment, at least, Hiro did not want to stir that pot.

“I see,” Garda said. “The man’s too much trouble to leave alive and too inconvenient to kill, so you’ll make him a casualty of war...and dead men make good scapegoats. Do I have that right?”

“More or less.”

Garda had said nothing incorrect, but he had not grasped the full extent of

Hiro's plan. First, Hiro would make it known that von Kilo was responsible for all of the Fourth Legion's military missteps. Second, by disposing of the man, he would throw House Nikkel into crisis. Finally, by lending his aid to House Nikkel in their time of need, he would make them his vassals and expand his influence over the south.

"So? Do I have your cooperation?"

"Very well. I'll bring you the blackguard's head." Garda tossed the bottle back to Hiro. "With any luck, that'll earn me better drink."

The man lay down and turned his back, resting his head on his arms. Clearly, he had decided that their conversation was over. Hiro turned to leave, but at that moment, something seemed to occur to Garda. He rolled back over and looked up at Hiro.

"I was meaning to sleep a while. There's nothing else you need me for, I trust?"

"No, that's fine. Save your strength. You'll need it for tomorrow."

"Aye, maybe I'll do that."

As Hiro left, he turned to the sentry at the entrance. "I'll return tomorrow morning. Until then, nobody else is to enter."

"As you command!" the man replied briskly.

With that taken care of, Hiro made his way back to his own tent. An infantryman ran up to him en route and fell to one knee, breathing hard.

"The enemy spies have been detained, sir," he blurted out.

"Excellent. Have them brought to my tent."

"At once, sir!"

As the soldier departed, Hiro stopped and looked up at the sky. A scattering of stars glimmered like jewels in the darkness, and the moon's soft glow lent the nighttime chill the illusion of a gentle warmth.

"Just as beautiful as ever," he murmured. His breath formed white clouds as he smiled to himself. "Some things never change."

A memory flashed through his mind: a woman's face as she praised a night sky just like this one.

It is in doubt that dreams are born and reality finds its brilliance.

She had been wise, and she had been kind; a veritable goddess who had loved the people with all her heart.

The world is filled with falsehoods, and humans are fated to live and die blind to the truth.

Now, those very humans whose blindness she had lamented stood tall as the rulers of the continent. Between humans, álfar, dwarves, zlostá, and beastfolk—the five peoples of Aletia—and the three others known as the wild races, this world was growing by the day. Yet the strife that had so grieved her still plagued it, even after all these years.

“There can be no order in the heavens while fools wear crowns.”

And so, although her flame was yet small, he would nurture the Valditte until she blazed like the sun and install her in the heavens to shower her light upon all. Hiro stretched out his hand to the sky, where dark clouds now stifled the moon's light.

“But until then, I'll keep her safe from harm.”

More power. That was what he needed. One man's schemes could only go so far. One thousand years ago, the Black Hand and the Crow Legion had waited on his hand—an array of talent formidable enough to break through any obstacle. Their conquest had swept across the land like a devouring maw.

“And so it must be again.”

The favor of the heavens, the fealty of the earth, and the devotion of men. Liz still lacked all three, but once that changed, she would shine more brilliantly than ever. As the radiant full moon reigned over the sky with its host of stars, so too would she reign over the land with her host of faithful. Hiro turned his eyes to the princess's tent.

“That day isn't far away...but for now, she doesn't need to worry about such things.”

The hem of the Black Camellia flapped in the night air as he turned away.

Hiro returned to his tent to find it swaying in the freezing wind. As he stepped inside, a gale picked up, whistling like a howling beast. He felt the temperature falling on his skin and pulled up his collar to gird against the cold.

A man entered, escorted by a soldier. At first glance, he seemed to wear the armor of the Fourth Legion, but on closer inspection, his garb was of an entirely different make, cleverly altered to attain a passing resemblance. The differences would have been obvious in daytime, but were subtle enough to go undetected under cover of night.

“You are one of the duchy’s spies, I assume?” Hiro asked.

The man gave no answer, but the soldier beside him nodded.

Hiro rested his elbow on the chair and cupped his chin in his hand, studying the man carefully. The spy’s face betrayed no fear, only grim resolve. This was a man who had made his peace with death.

“You look like someone who’s faithful to his country.” Hiro picked up a small pouch from the pile on the table and held it so the spy could see. “This is full of golden grantzes. Enough for a man to live off for two years.”

It took some time for the spy to answer. “What game are you playing?”

“Please. I’m not trying to buy you. I want to reward your loyalty, nothing more.” Hiro tossed the pouch. It hit the man in the chest and fell to the ground, spilling its contents across the ground with a metallic jangle. “Take it. You’re free to go. Give my regards to your commander when you make your report.” His smile deepened as he approached the man, laying a hand on his shoulder. “Of course, I can hardly send you back empty-handed. I’ll tell you what, I’ll give you the information you’re here for. That’ll save you the trouble of scouting out our camp.”

“What scheme is this?”

“Take me at my word or don’t, it’s your choice.” Hiro crouched down and lowered his voice. “We’re going to lead a night raid on your encampment. That’s what our fifteen hundred camels are for. We can’t afford your forces doing the same to us, though. Our soldiers are exhausted. We’ve made our

defenses look secure, but it's all a ruse to give our men a chance to rest."

As the spy struggled for words, Hiro picked up the fallen grantzes and slid them back into the pouch, one by one. "I wouldn't mention that you learned this from me. It'll only make your commander suspicious. Oh, and feel free to inspect the camp for yourself as much as time permits. You'll see that I'm telling the truth." He slipped the pouch into the spy's pocket and resettled himself in his chair. "He's free to go."

The soldier looked taken aback. "Are you certain, sir? Ought we not kill him?"

"He is not to be harmed. Don't get any clever ideas once I'm out of sight either. Ensure that he makes it safely out of the camp."

The soldier inclined his head. "As you command, sir." He turned to the spy and with a brisk "After me!" escorted the man from the tent.

Hiro resettled himself in his seat and waited for the next spy to be brought in. As he sank deep into the chair, Drix appeared soundlessly beside him.

"May I ask what you are planning, sir?"

Hiro shot the man a sidelong glance, his gaze laden with suspicion. To be able to blend so seamlessly into the darkness of the tent was an unusual skill for a simple advisor to possess. Stranger even than that, though, was the strength of Drix's loyalty. He obeyed Hiro's every order with an unquestioning devotion that reverence for the second emperor's scion could not quite explain.

"He would have been a hard man to buy, but he was too valuable to kill." Hiro took care not to let his voice betray his misgivings.

"Forgive me, sir, but I do not see why. We have three others."

"Better four than three. Every man who reports to this Marquis Rankeel makes their story that much more convincing."

"I see. But how does it profit us to sell that story to the marquis? He will conclude that we are vulnerable and attack."

"I'm counting on it. I'll tell the other three the same thing. Well, all but one, of course. Someone has to draw the short straw...although I suppose they'll all meet the same fate in the end."

Drix thought for a moment. "So your goal is to sow paranoia in the enemy general's heart," he concluded.

"When a cautious man receives conflicting reports, his first instinct will be to ascertain the truth." Hiro turned to Drix, scratching at his eyepatch absentmindedly. "If three men all agree and only one speaks differently, what will this Rankeel conclude?"

Drix paused. "That somebody has been bought."

"Hence, these." Hiro gestured to the three pouches on the table. "What will he do when he discovers enemy coin in his spies' pockets?"

"If I were in his place, I would take their heads. But what if these men conceal their gold instead? Or what if they are faithful? They may well dispose of the gold on the way back to their camp."

"That's why I predisposed them to cling to life. When someone prepared for death is granted a sudden reprieve, it gives them a certain sense of security. They develop a powerful attachment to living. Giving them coin only heightens the effect. There's enough in those pouches that they'll feel compelled to keep it on their person."

"And if they're crooked, they'll keep it out of greed."

"Exactly. The result will be the same either way. Besides, Lichtein is teetering on the brink of destruction. Even if they somehow defeat us, their future is anything but certain. If you were them, wouldn't you want to keep your gold where you could see it?"

"I see."

Drix often had questions, but they never led to disagreements. The man simply filed the answers away in his head and carried on. Perhaps he was simply diligent about his work, but Hiro sensed there was something more to it. He narrowed his eyes as the other man sank into thought.

"Second Tribune Drix."

"Yes, sir?"

"You may show the next man in."

“Of course, sir.”

Despite his suspicions, Hiro had no time to confront Drix, nor any evidence to substantiate his concerns. That moment would come, but until then, it was better to leave the man to his own devices.

“While you’re at it, could you tell someone to bring me my swift Drake?”

“As you command.” Drix bowed and left.

I can afford to leave him be for now. I have a good idea of who’s pulling his strings.

Hiro leaned back in his chair with a heavy sigh. The battle earlier in the day would have devastated the ducal army’s morale. Soldiers were probably deserting at that very moment. The enemy was wavering. All it would take to further thin their number was a well-placed nudge. Then, once von Kilo and his followers fell in the coming battle, this war would be over.

“That reminds me...I have a messenger to send.”

Soon, the final piece would slide into place and the plans he had laid long in advance would come to fruition.

“It’s almost time for the curtain call.”

Hiro leveled a keen gaze at the entrance of his tent, scratching at his eyepatch as he stared.

*

A grim mood hung over the Lichtein encampment. Marquis Rankeel and his advisors’ faces were grave, and more than a few pairs of lips were blue. They did not lack for warmth—their tent had its fair share of heating devices—but the unfavorable state of the battlefield and the bleakness of their prospects leeched away any comfort it could provide.

An advisor turned to Rankeel. “My lord,” he said through trembling lips. “The men are deserting. Mostly slaves for now, but in time, the soldiers will follow.”

Rankeel scowled. “I thought I had made it clear that desertion would be harshly punished.”

Fear of the man in black was taking its toll, but there was little they could do to stem the bleeding. At best, they could try to ease the men's terror, but their options were limited to supplying them with drink—and when the enemy could launch a night raid at any time, they needed their soldiers alert.

“If I know that, the enemy knows it too.”

The night raid was a fundamental element of warfare. If used effectively, a small force could devastate a much larger one with ease. The reverse was also true, however, as—after their stunt at sundown—Rankeel assumed the enemy must be aware. As a result, he had allowed his soldiers to rest but not to remove their armor. There was no telling if they would need it during the night.

“I sink deeper into this mire at every turn.”

He knew that he was letting caution get the better of him, but by the same token, he could not afford to act rashly. One slip would send his nation over the brink. These deserters were yet another prong of that same dilemma. It was one thing to punish them, but if he began spilling their blood to make examples of them, it would breed discontent among the rest of his men. Even taking them prisoner would cause more problems than it solved. His only choice was to let them go, but that meant accepting a constant drain on morale.

“All I can do now is wait for my spies to report.”

His course of action would hinge on whether or not the enemy was plotting a night raid. He knew the location of the enemy camp from his scouts' reports, but their security seemed unexpectedly tight, to the point where an attack under cover of darkness would accomplish little. If anything, it might hurt their own troops.

“Nothing short of vexing...”

Hoping to break this deadlock, he had dispatched several spies to scout out the enemy encampment earlier in the evening. There was a limit to how much information they could gather in a matter of hours, but they might be able to shed some light on the enemy's plans.

“The question is whether we can beat them to the punch.”

Rankeel had two thousand camel riders stationed outside the camp, awaiting

his orders. Once his spies returned, he would decide the opportune moment to use them.

At that moment, something interrupted his train of thought. He turned to one of his advisors. “Where is Lord Karl?”

“He was taken by an unexpected bout of fatigue, my lord,” the man responded. “He is currently resting.”

As Duke Lichtein’s only remaining heir, the burden of ruling the nation had fallen on Karl’s shoulders, but the man’s sickly constitution meant he rarely even ventured outdoors. The exertion of their march appeared to be catching up with him.

“Increase his guard, just in case,” Rankeel ordered. “If anything were to happen to him, Lichtein would be finished.”

“At once, sir!”

Rankeel had hoped to have Karl inspire the troops, but the man’s health took precedence. If they lost him, their nation would be torn apart by the jackals at its borders.

“I never knew a man’s mind seized up so when his back was to the wall...”

The situation now felt far more desperate than it had two years ago when he had fended off Steissen. At that time, his death would not have meant the end—he had known that the high nobles were behind him, corrupt as they were, and that gave him the confidence to face forward without fear. Only now that they were gone did he realize how essential their presence had been.

“Pull yourself together, man. Moping about like this, it’s no wonder your soldiers won’t follow you.” Rankeel allowed himself a self-effacing grin, then raised his head to address his men again. “Do we know where the Fourth Legion are keeping their supplies?”

“Not precisely, sir. We believe it to be somewhere around here, but we cannot say for certain.” The man gestured to the map laid out before them, indicating a fort that the Fourth Legion had recently captured. Destroying the enemy’s supply chain would put paid to any hopes they might have of a protracted war. Their morale would fall and the tide would turn in the ducal

army's favor. The move could also backfire, however. A desperate enemy was an enemy that would fight as one.

"A dilemma indeed, but we need every advantage that we can get." They could not afford to pass up the slightest chance. A victory there would provide a critical boost to morale.

"Indeed, sir. Now, if only the enemy would try to field the rebels..."

"Surely they would not be so foolish," Rankeel said. "It would be impossible to coordinate with untrained slaves. They would only be a burden. If I were the imperials, I would cut their throats and be done with them."

"But the Fourth Legion has kept them alive. It would be prudent to assume they did so for a reason."

"I asked myself many times if there wasn't some way to turn the rebel army to our purposes, always in vain. The enemy has no need of more numbers. Perhaps they might use them as human shields, but that would risk disorder in their own ranks if the slaves chose to run." Rankeel crossed his arms and grumbled to himself. "If there is any sense in shackling themselves with such a liability, I do not see it."

"Perhaps we are giving the matter more thought than they did," the advisor quipped, trying to lighten the mood. Under normal circumstances, Rankeel would have dismissed the man for his impertinence. In that moment, however, he was grateful for the attempt at levity.

"If only that were so," he said, taking the remark on its face. "If confusing us was their only goal, the battle today would have sufficed. They would have no need of incorporating such an unpredictable element into their own army." He gave a defeated shrug. "But there is no sense in poring over such things. The more we tie ourselves in knots, the more we play into our enemy's hands. We will decide whether to launch a night raid once our spies return. Until then, we will speak no more of this."

They had enough problems as it was. Inventing new ones was folly.

After some time, word arrived that the spies had returned. Rankeel ordered them to be shown in. A man entered the tent and fell to one knee in a

respectful bow. After congratulating him on fulfilling his duty, Rankeel asked him what he had learned.

“Of course, sir.” With his head still bowed, the man launched into a fluid report. “I infiltrated the enemy encampment to find the men had been given drink to raise morale and permission to rest out of armor. They did not seem concerned with the possibility of a night attack. As best I could tell, the troops were too exhausted to fight. The enemy is still preparing for a night raid, however. They have stationed fifteen hundred camel riders outside their camp for that purpose.”

Rankeel pondered for a moment. “So they are plotting to attack. What of their defenses? Could they fend us off?”

“Their defenses appear secure, but that is only a ruse. From what I have seen, a night raid will devastate them.”

“I see. You are dismissed. I will see that you are furnished with food and water.”

“My thanks, sir.”

As the spy departed, Rankeel’s advisors turned to him with delighted faces. “If the enemy is preparing for a night raid, we ought to seize the initiative and strike first.”

“We must not be hasty,” the marquis cautioned. “Let us hear what the others have to say.”

It would be foolish to rush to a decision based on one man’s report. If he had happened to overlook something, it might spell defeat. All of Rankeel’s rational instincts urged him to be prudent.

“Send the next man in.”

“At once, sir.”

The advisors seemed discontent, but ultimately assented. Rankeel understood the appeal of urgency. They were fewer in number, their men were deserting, and a single man had laid waste to their forces that very day. The spy’s report was enticing—but if it proved too good to be true, it would be not only them,

but their entire nation that paid the price.

“We can afford to hear every man’s report. Time is still on our side.” Rankeel was starting to doubt even himself, but he shook his head to dispel his misgivings.

“I have brought the next man,” a soldier announced.

“Good. Send him in.”

“Yes, sir!”

The second spy knelt before Rankeel and delivered his report. “I infiltrated the enemy encampment to find the soldiers with spears and torches, equipped to fend off a night raid. They appeared tired, but morale was high, with the sixth princess working to lift their spirits. I expect that any attack will be easily repelled.”

The advisors blanched at the man’s words—the very opposite of the previous report. The tent took on a background hum of worried whispers.

Rankeel put a hand to his forehead and sighed. “What of the camel riders outside the encampment?”

“There were camels, sir, but no riders. It seems they are being saved for use by a select few.”

“Very good. You are dismissed.”

“Yes, sir.”

As the spy departed, Rankeel sank back wearily into his chair. One of the advisors offered him water.

“My thanks.”

“This certainly complicates matters,” the man said. “Small discrepancies we could have overlooked, but with such glaring contradictions, who can say what our best course would be?”

“Agreed,” Rankeel replied wearily. “Send the others in. Once we have heard what all four have to say, we can come to a decision.”

The third and fourth spies’ reports agreed with that of the first, leaving the

second spy the only outlier. Rankeel called the man back for questioning.

“Do you know why you have been recalled?” he asked.

“N-No, sir,” the spy stammered.

“There were discrepancies between your report and the others. Significant ones.”

The spy’s eyes widened with surprise. Rankeel scoffed internally. Clearly, the man was a good actor.

“Search him,” he commanded. “No doubt we will find enemy coin.”

The tent guards held the spy’s arms behind his back while the advisors rifled through his clothing.

“It’s here, sir!” a man cried from the huddle. “He has a pouch full of Steissen silver!”

“That settles it,” Rankeel snarled.

“Y-You’re mistaken, sir!” the spy cried. All the blood seemed to have drained from his face.

Steel glinted in Rankeel’s eyes. “About what?”

“I’ve not been bought! Every word I spoke was true! The enemy is prepared!”

“If you weren’t bought, then how did a pouch of Steissen silver find its way into your pocket?”

“I...” The spy scrabbled for words.

“Behead this traitor,” Rankeel declared contemptuously.

“No! Please, I’m loyal, I swear it! Mercy, sir, mercy!”

The soldiers forced the spy’s head to the ground and brought a blade down on his neck. Blood sprayed across the confines of the tent. Rankeel coldly stepped in the growing scarlet pool. “Your homeland stands on the threshold of ruin and you would sell it for coin?!” he spat, hurling the pouch at the spy’s decapitated body. The contents scattered across the ground.

Rankeel stood for a moment, chest heaving, before turning to his advisors.

“The enemy is idle. Ready the camel riders!”

“Are they not also preparing a raid, sir?”

“What of it? We have told our men to sleep in armor for that very reason. Command our units to stay vigilant and ready for an assault.” Rankeel lowered his gaze to the map, considering the enemy’s path of advance. “If they intend to come at us from behind, they have a long way to travel. With fifteen hundred, their noise would reveal them. I doubt they’ll try, but just in case, I want our rear lit up with bonfires. Triple palisades to the flanks. We’ll force them to come at us head-on. Make ready our bows and our spears.”

“At once, sir!” The advisors surged out of the tent. For better or for worse, this night would decide their fate.

As his subordinates departed, Rankeel abruptly recalled the man in black. “Wait,” he commanded one advisor as he passed. “Send the elite unit I assembled to guard Lord Karl.”

“Understood, sir!” the man replied.

With the skill the man in black possessed, it would be an easy matter for him to plunge alone into the center of the camp. Rankeel would guard Karl from any such assault, all while crushing the enemy’s camel riders. That would raise the army’s spirits. Then, once their own raid broke the back of the enemy force, the man in black would be alone and at their mercy.

“I’ll spill your blood before this night is done,” Rankeel whispered.

His army was as ready as it would ever be—or so he believed.

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“If all is going well,” Hiro murmured, “our raid should be wreaking havoc.”

The night was chill, and heavy clouds covered the stars. Two hundred light infantry stood in silence at his back, their mouths firmly shut. All around was darkness and stillness. As they waited with bated breath, Drix leaned down to Hiro’s ear.

“What makes you so sure they will come this way?”

“I made certain they caught wind of our attack plans. They need their raid to

succeed, so they can't risk running into our forces, and the more trapped people feel, the more simplistic their thinking becomes. They need quick results, so they'll choose the quickest path...and that will take them straight here."

Drix exhaled in admiration. "How old did you say you are, my lord?"

"Sixteen. Seventeen soon."

"Yet you read the battlefield like a general. You possess a frightening talent."

"You'd be surprised what you can learn from leafing through old books."

Drix looked unconvinced. "Surely it is more than that. Mars's blood flows strong in your veins, I am certain, even after a thousand years. His Majesty Emperor Schwartz would be proud to know that he has such a worthy successor."

Emperor Schwartz was standing right there, but Hiro could hardly say that. He only gave a noncommittal nod. At that moment, he heard a faint noise from up ahead and ducked down low. Drix quickly followed suit.

"They have two thousand camel riders, if our spies are to be believed," said Drix, "and we have five hundred light infantry. Those are not favorable odds."

"Not in a fair fight, but this won't be one. Once I engage the camel riders, sound the drums. When you hear the enemy fall into confusion, order the archers to fire."

"As you command, my lord. Be safe."

"I leave you in charge of the men." Hiro roused his swiftdrake with a tug on its reins.

"You mean to take your mount?" Drix asked, incredulous. "But what of the arrows?"

"The Black Camellia won't let either of us get hurt." Patting his chest with pride, Hiro disappeared into the night.

Drix stared for a moment, dumbfounded, but quickly set about issuing commands to the soldiers. Before long, the din of clashing blades and battle cries rose from the darkness. An unseen battle had begun.

“Strike the drums, loud as you can!” Drix bellowed. “Raise your voices high!”

A *boom* split the night air. More followed, the thunder of drums ringing from all around. Before the battle, they had sent one hundred soldiers to each of the other three sides of the field to lie in wait.

It was still too early to loose their arrows. Drix peered into the night. A glimmer of silver danced in the darkness, trailing brief arcs before flaring out. It made for an otherworldly sight, like an earthly shooting star. He watched in wonder for a while before a subordinate’s hand on his shoulder brought him to his senses.

“Enough!” he called, flustered. “Stop the drums. Launch the signal arrow!”

With a whistle, a signal arrow vanished into the blackness. Another followed several moments later. The second was the sign; the soldiers reached into their quivers and let fly arrow after arrow. Screams rose in the distance.

“We’re hitting our marks!” Drix called. “Keep firing! Rain death down on them!”

The soldiers had no sense of the enemy’s position. They fired blindly. As their quivers were beginning to empty, a cry of “Run for your lives!” went up from somewhere in the dark. If the sun had been high, they would have been treated to the sight of the enemy scattering in confusion, but the veil of night obscured the scene.

Before long, Hiro returned astride his swiftdrake. It was impossible to tell what state he was in. Dressed from head to toe in black, he seemed to melt into the darkness.

Drix ran up to him. “My lord! Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine.”

“I’m glad to hear it. How much did we thin the enemy’s numbers?”

“I don’t know exactly, but maybe more than expected. I saw them attacking each other. We can only hope that they keep running instead of returning to camp.”

“Judging from the state of them, I doubt they could make their way back if

they tried.”

Running blind at night was akin to drowning in the ocean. The enemy would hardly be able to tell which way was up, and that was if they were even in their right minds—the chaos of the ambush would have left their brains addled by panic. Many would lose their bearings and freeze to death before dawn. If any were wounded, their odds of survival would plummet. Drix began to wonder how many of the two thousand would survive the night, but he stopped himself. They would be able to see for themselves once the sun rose.

“We can honor the soldiers once this is over,” he said. “We must return to camp.”

Hiro nodded. “Agreed. We’ll need to be well rested for tomorrow.” He turned to the soldiers. “Every man who fought for me here may drink tonight. In moderation, though. I don’t want any hangovers tomorrow morning.”

A cheer went up from the men. Their steps seemed instantly lighter, as though their exhaustion had been dispelled.

“I fancy the enemy will soon discover our trick,” Drix said.

“I’m sure they will,” Hiro replied, “but they’ll need time and men to mount another night raid, and they don’t have either. Besides, they’ll hopefully be preoccupied.”

Something seemed to occur to Drix. “Pardon the change of subject, but why did you give one of the spies Steissen silver?”

“Tell me, what would you do if somebody confronted you with a barrage of questions?”

Drix seemed puzzled but took Hiro’s question at face value. “Curse them, I suppose. But I would try to answer as best I could.”

“It’s the same idea. Bombard the enemy with unanswered problems and deny them time to think. That’s what the Steissen silver is for. I bet our Marquis Rankeel is tearing his hair out right now trying to decipher what it means.”

“And you’ve arranged things so that before he can, he’ll have a new problem to deal with.”

“Exactly.”

“And have you given any thought to if all this doesn’t work?”

“I have, but I’d never get anywhere if I was constantly scared of failure. He’s fallen for all my tricks so far. All that’s left is to give him enough hope to keep him from running, then plunge him into despair.”

Hiro’s tone was nonchalant, but enough of a shiver ran down Drix’s spine to stop him in his tracks. This battlefield and all the people in it—this boy held them all in the palm of his hand.

He laughed. “‘A mind fit to serve a king,’ indeed. If only that explained it.”

Hiro was merely sixteen years old, but he already displayed fearsome ability. He was pitched against the Rising Hawk, a champion of Lichtein who had repelled thirty thousand men, and yet he was plotting the most audacious schemes—and succeeding. Heroes were like children to him. Storied champions were but toys. Just how far could he see? Had Mars, his distant ancestor, been this cunning in his time? An ordinary man like Drix could not hope to fathom the minds of such figures. What their eyes saw, what machinations they hatched...all were beyond him.

And that made it all the more fascinating, he thought, to see where their paths would take them.

*

“Give me your report.”

Rankeel watched the flame consume the camel’s carcass—just one of many burning corpses dotting the camp, slain by the ducal army’s arrows. None of them had borne riders.

“Our losses are minimal, sir. A few wounded but no dead. The camels’ stampede sent several tents up in flames, but the fires were put out before they could spread.”

Soldiers and slaves alike sat on the ground, their breathing ragged with exertion. Their heroic efforts had foiled the enemy offensive, such as it was...although Rankeel was not even certain that was true. In terms of sapping

his army's strength—which was likely all it was ever meant to do—it was hard to deny that the raid had been a success.

Rankeel tore his gaze away from the carnage and set off toward a nearby tent, where his strategy meeting awaited. "Let the men rest," he ordered his advisors as they fell in behind him.

"As you command, sir."

"And one more thing." He stopped and looked back over his shoulder. His army had been ready, but his enemy had shown itself to be nothing more than a riderless herd of camels—a preposterous farce. "Squeeze the spies for all they know, then cut off their heads."

"At once, sir!"

"So this is what I get for taking the bait," he sighed to himself. "I knew I shouldn't have been so hasty."

His enemy was employing children's tricks, but each one had been devastatingly effective. They were both ingenious and terrifyingly calculated. Surely this commander must enjoy some repute in the empire—and if not, this campaign would mark the rise of a new star. Times were changing, the age was turning, and Rankeel found himself forced to acknowledge that he was becoming a relic of the past.

"I had thought myself still in my prime, but it seems I was mistaken."

He had reached the limits of his potential. He was not young enough to grasp the spark of inspiration that could lift his army from this quagmire, nor wise enough to have a solution ready at hand. Perhaps his pride had gotten the better of him. He had let the name of the Rising Hawk convince him that none soared higher.

He stepped inside the tent and sank deep into his chair. The light was gone from his eyes.

"Perhaps we should retreat after all..."

But returning to the capital now would only invite the nobles to drive a knife into his back. Rankeel would be admitting that his promises of victory had only

been bluster, and that he had let the enemy run rings around him. He could expect no mercy, least of all from men who had despised him from the first.

“And even if by some miracle they let me live, we’d never hold out.”

It wouldn’t take long holed up inside the city for the nobles to start turning their coats. Any siege would soon be broken by treachery. Every course of action seemed hopeless. He could barely even stand to think about it.

“I bear news, sir.”

One of Rankeel’s advisors entered the tent. He hastened to the table and placed three pouches upon it.

The marquis looked up at the man with lifeless eyes. “What’s this you’ve brought me now?”

“We found them in the spies’ pockets.”

“Did any confess?” He reached for the pouches and opened them up, not that their contents mattered anymore.

“No, sir. They insisted to the end that they had spoken the truth.”

“I see.” Rankeel glanced inside and grinned humorlessly at the contents. “Still you seek to confound me,” he muttered to himself. “Have you not yet had your fill?”

Each of the small bags was stuffed with golden grantzes. Strange. The liar’s pouch had contained Steissen silver. Rankeel began to ponder what it could mean—and a second advisor dashed through the entrance.

“My lord marquis!” the man cried. There was an edge of panic in his voice. “The night raid has failed! Fewer than five hundred of our riders have returned!”

Rankeel had expected as much. He had been so outclassed at every other turn, he had long since given up hope for the night raid’s success. What he had thought was an opportunity had only ever been a ruse.

“A pity,” was all he said.

“The Fourth Legion has thirteen thousand men now, sir, counting the rebels.

Are we to drive them back with only three?"

That was the same number with which Rankeel had once fended off Steissen. Back then, however, he had known that even if he failed, Lichtein would endure. This time was different. He was the last line of defense between his homeland and the Grantzian Empire. If he fell here, the duchy would have no more time to raise another army.

He felt an invisible blade slide between his ribs, causing him no pain but seeking his heart nonetheless.

Retreat.

Those seven ominous letters seemed to hover before his eyes.

"My lord! My lord marquis! I bring good tidings!"

A messenger stumbled into the tent. The advisors turned to him with withering stares, but he seemed not to care. His attention was solely on Rankeel. The marquis stared back, furrowing his brow dubiously.

"Calm yourself, man. What is it you have to say?"

"We have discovered where the enemy is storing their supplies!"

"You have?!" one of the advisors exclaimed.

Rankeel himself rose from his chair. "Where?"

The messenger approached the table and pointed to the map. His finger landed on the very spot they had initially suspected: the old fort that the Fourth Legion had commandeered. "Imperial troops have been sighted carrying supplies into here."

"What of their defenses?" Rankeel demanded. "Do you know their numbers?"

"Not precisely, my lord, but we estimate somewhere between eight hundred and a thousand men."

"And what of the fort itself?"

"The main gate is burned down and the rear gate is rubble."

"So it will not withstand a siege." Rankeel cupped his chin in his hand, thinking. "If we rode out now, we could fall on the fort with all our forces, burn

their supplies as the sun rises, then take advantage of their dismay to strike their army in the flank. Perhaps...just perhaps...it might work.”

The enemy knew that the Lichtein forces were desperate. They would never suspect such a daring move as targeting their supply train. If the ducal army captured the fort before dawn and torched it just as the enemy realized they had been outflanked, the shock would throw their foe into disarray.

Rankeel planted both hands on his desk and leaned forward, looking over his advisors one by one. “If anyone has any objections, raise them now.”

“What are we to do with our camp?”

“We leave it. Pulling down our tents will take time that we do not have. Besides, even empty, it will serve to disguise our intentions for a little while.”

The advisor nodded, appeased.

Rankeel continued in a lower voice, “But you must not speak of this to anyone. It is all but certain that enemy spies have infiltrated our forces. We will tell the soldiers that we are retreating. If any spy catches wind of that, so much the better.”

If their flanking maneuver was to be successful, they could not afford to let the imperials cotton on to their plans. If there were enemy agents among their number, let them report to their commander that the ducal army had fallen back.

Rankeel’s face was stern once more, and his voice was resolute. “Talk of attacking the fort will not leave this tent. If that is all, you may attend to your duties.”

“Yes, sir!” his advisors chorused.

The light had returned to his eyes, and the fog had cleared from his mind.

“I’ll break your stranglehold yet,” he said under his breath.

*

The next morning

The Fourth Legion had packed up their camp and now stood in ranks facing

north. The thousand-strong advance guard had just finished forming up one side away. At their backs were the three thousand freedmen and sellswords who had once belonged to the Liberation Army.

“They’ve torched the fort.”

As the words left Hiro’s lips, a distant plume of black smoke spiraled skyward. It rose from the ruined fort in the distance, beyond the advance guard. War cries split the morning air as the ducal army arrived on the field. With the success of their ploy, morale was high.

The Fourth Legion, however, was not as dismayed as the enemy might have expected. If anything, they seemed bemused as to why the ducal army would bother setting a crumbled old fort alight. Their supplies were located elsewhere. The now-burning edifice was empty, save for the few shipments of weapons and provisions that Hiro had shipped there to mislead the enemy scouts.

“They never seem to tire of falling for our tricks,” Drix remarked.

Hiro only shrugged before settling down into the simple chair that had been laid out for him. “They’re desperate. With such tempting bait dangling in front of them, they can’t help themselves.” He scratched his swift Drake’s head, glanced briefly at Drix, then turned his eyes eagerly to the field. The advance guard and the ducal army had clashed.

“Lord Hiro,” Drix ventured, “while they are mistaken, the enemy still *believes* they have burned our supplies. Their perceived success has them elated. I fear the advance guard cannot hold such numbers. If they fail and the Liberation Army behind them buckles, the enemy will push through to our main forces drunk with victory. That, I believe, would be...inopportune.”

Hiro raised a hand to interrupt the man. “That won’t be a concern.”

“I see. You have planned for this eventuality?”

“Victory is never guaranteed, even when the odds are firmly in our favor. I will act if the situation demands it...although something tells me that the enemy’s morale won’t last.”

The ducal army’s exhaustion was mounting. Hiro had taken great pains to

ensure as much. He had forced them to remain constantly alert, endeavoring to deny them rest at every turn.

“They’ve been laboring valiantly since midnight, it’s true. I look forward to watching this unfold.” Drix’s mouth widened into a smile as he stroked his chin.

Hiro narrowed his eyes at the man for a second, then he gestured with his left hand. A standard-bearer saw the signal and raised a banner high: a lily on a crimson field, the livery of the sixth princess. The cavalry on the flanks saw the signal and steadily advanced. In a show of perfect coordination, the Fourth Legion’s formation transformed. The army’s commander, satisfied that everything was going according to plan, approached Hiro on horseback.

“Is it time?” she asked.

She looked as beautiful as ever with her flame-red hair. The grime of the battlefield did nothing to dull her loveliness. If anything, it made it shine all the brighter.

“More or less,” Hiro replied. “Not long now.”

“Then I should—”

“You should stay here, where it’s safe. Is that clear?”

He knew what she would say. She wanted to fight on the front line. There were times when such a thing was necessary, but this was not one of them. She would only be depriving the army of its leader, throwing the chain of command into chaos.

Liz puffed out her cheeks in a sulky little pout. With a diplomatic smile, Hiro gestured to the lady-in-waiting sitting in front of her in the saddle—Mille in disguise.

“Are you planning on taking her with you?”

“I was thinking you could...you know...”

“I don’t think she likes me.”

Ever since finding out that he had sent the Liberation Army to the front line, Mille had been pointedly ignoring him. “Hate” might perhaps be overstating it, but she certainly didn’t trust him.

“Oh, I’m sure she’s just nervous,” Liz said, clearly trying to make him feel better. “I can’t blame her, now that she knows you’re descended from the second emperor.”

Instead of replying, Hiro raised his arm, pointing to the ongoing battle between the advance guard and the ducal army. “Once the signal comes from the Liberation Army, we’ll send the left and right wings of cavalry into their flanks at full speed.”

“What about their rear?” Liz looked perplexed. “If they’re under attack on three sides, won’t they just run?”

“I’ve got a plan for that. There’s no way out. They lost before the fighting even started.”

Before the war began, even. From the very moment they had first crossed the imperial border. They fell short of the Grantzian Empire in every respect—in territory, military strength, resources, population. To attack such an enemy with no allies and no support was inviting their own doom. There was no way to know what chance they had believed they had; the nobles who had made that calculation were all dead, and Hiro pitied Marquis Rankeel for having to salvage their mistakes with the depleted remnants of their forces.

What would I have done in his place?

He knew without thinking that he would have chosen to fight, as Rankeel had. Indeed, that was exactly what he had done a thousand years ago. Perhaps he hadn’t exactly had a choice, as such, but in any case, he could empathize with the man’s situation. In his position, retreat meant ruin, and any time spent waiting would be better used forging ahead in search of an escape.

Although my situation wasn’t quite that bad...

Not only had Duke Lichtein been foolish enough to fall to the Liberation Army, he had taken his high nobles with him, leaving Rankeel with only the most inept parasites of the court at his back. It was admirable that the man had still chosen to fight under such conditions. His gambit—to bait the Fourth Legion deep into Lichtein territory, lure them into combat with the Liberation Army, and strike once they were exhausted—had been artful. Had it worked, he would now be returning to Azbakal a hero twice over, his name resounding throughout Aletia

as the man who had tamed the imperial lion. No, it would be a waste to kill him. His mind was too valuable to lose.

I can use him...but only if he's alive, and there's no guarantee he'll survive the day.

It was not easy to capture a man alive in battle, and fixating on it could do more harm than good. If Rankeel was the man Hiro hoped he was, he would survive the fighting; if not, Hiro would simply have to find another way. For that reason, he had not proposed capturing Rankeel to anybody, not even Liz.

Will heaven spare him or strike him down? Or perhaps...

Hiro stood and flung his right arm sideways. A new standard unfurled over the battlefield, its wide expanse billowing as though to clear the haze of sand—a dragon on a black field, clutching a silver sword in its talons. The banner of kings.

A cheer went up from the soldiers, and no wonder: for a thousand long years, this standard had languished in the detritus of history, depicted only in legends and dusty old tomes. Now it was reborn before their eyes, a sight to overwhelm the pious of heart. A smile graced Hiro's lips as he grasped Excalibur's hilt and drew it firmly from its resting place.

The soldiers fell silent at the sight. The gleaming blade caught the sun's light as it pointed toward the firmament, splitting it into a halo of rainbow colors.

"All units, advance."

He spoke without ornament, dictating only what must be done. His curt command was hardly more than a whisper, far too quiet to span the battlefield, but it carried all the same. Across the first cohort, then the second, then the heart of the army, soldiers beat their spears against their shields and raised their voices high.

Once upon a time, Emperor Artheus had said this of his comrade-in-arms:

That he was born to rule the battlefield.

That he was a strategist to transcend the world of men.

Thus, Mars needed no words to move men's hearts, for his presence alone was

enough.



“Phew...”

Hiro loosened his collar so that he could breathe a little easier. His chest was tight with nerves. A long time had passed since he had last given such a command. He glanced at Liz to gauge her reaction and found her with a smile on her lips. She was issuing orders to the soldiers, Lævateinn held high.

I guess it must have gone all right.

He let out a long breath. From the look of her, his performance had been convincing enough.

As relief filled his chest, a horn blew. Its shrill note raced through the ranks like a wave, and the soldiers joined in with battle cries, forming a solemn melody that shook the air like a dragon’s roar. The army began to advance in lockstep.

Normally, signaling the advance would have been Liz’s duty as commander, but she had staunchly refused. “This is your first battle, so you can do the honors,” she had said at the pre-dawn strategy meeting. “And fix that bedhead, mister. You can’t lead an army like that. Come here.” After that, he recalled, he had been mercilessly mothered.

“Are we going to attack straight away?” Liz asked, interrupting his thoughts.

“Not yet. We’ll advance a little closer, then wait. With any luck, we won’t even...” Hiro cut himself off. A dust storm was whipping up over the front lines.

“It’s starting,” Liz said.

“And soon it’ll be over.” Hiro’s smile widened as he scratched his eyepatch. “We’ve given them hope. Now they’ll know despair.”

He stretched out his hand and closed his fist around the battlefield.

*

On the front line, confusion had overtaken the Fourth Legion’s advance guard. The sudden sandstorm had obscured their vision, blinding them to their surroundings.

“What’s happening now?!” von Kilo snapped as he swung his sword down,

cleaving through an enemy soldier's chest. Crimson spurted high into the air. The man crumpled, hacking up blood.

Von Kilo raised his sword in triumph. "Take care not to strike your comrades!" he bellowed to his men. "The sand will soon clear!"

The enemy had penetrated too deep into their lines. They desperately needed to fall back and regroup, but they could not. Von Kilo ground his teeth as he looked behind him. The soldiers of the Liberation Army were blocking their retreat.

"We wouldn't be in this position if they'd stop playing games!"

He needed to prove his valor if he was to be promoted to the central territories. He could not afford to disgrace himself, yet still these upstart slaves insisted on impeding him. With a snarl of fury, he swung his sword with renewed vigor. Screams rose. Blood sprayed. His blade found gaps in enemy armor and bit home, unerringly finding vital points as he cut men down.

"I'll not be trifled with!" he snarled.

Von Kilo had not climbed to the rank of general for nothing. He had known battlefields and butchery in his time, and he had more than once wavered between life and death. In no sense was he wanting as a soldier.

"My lord!" an advisor shouted. "The enemy's numbers are growing! We must fall back or we will be overrun!"

Von Kilo grimaced. "But if we do not stand our ground..."

"If we die here, all will be for nothing!"

"As well I know! But the slaves block our retreat!"

"They are only slaves, my lord! None will object if we spill their blood! If they stand in our way, we need only cut them down!"

"If Lord Hiro sees us abandon our men and kill our way to freedom, he will not be merciful."

"We can hardly tell friend from foe in this sandstorm. We need only tell him that we lost our bearings."

Von Kilo considered. “If that is truly the only way...”

“My lord, we have no time!”

“It is true that I can give no orders in this sand... Bah, there’s nothing for it. If we must fall back, then we must.” Despite his words, von Kilo’s expression was anything but regretful.

“At once, my lord! Let us—” The advisor toppled as he turned.

“Are you all right?” von Kilo cried, hurrying to the man’s sprawled body. An arrow protruded from the man’s skull. Blood trickled along the shaft to ooze into the sand.

“Arrows... Blast it all.”

The rest of the volley arrived mere moments later, raining down through the sandstorm. Scowling, von Kilo snatched up a nearby shield and huddled beneath it, but many of the men around him were not so lucky. They fell in droves, soldiers and advisors alike.

Von Kilo’s first thought was that the enemy must have been responsible, but strangely, the arrows were coming from behind. With the Liberation Army to their rear, the ducal army could not have taken up position there so quickly. The bombardment could only be coming from one source: the Liberation Army itself.

“Can those accursed slaves not even use their bows?!” he hissed through gritted teeth.

At last, there came a lull in the deluge of arrows. He stood and cast his shield aside, yanking a shaft from his arm with a grunt.

“Is anyone alive?” he called out. He set out walking through the cloud of sand only to stop in his tracks. An enormous figure emerged from the haze ahead—a familiar man with lilac skin. In his right hand the apparition held a bloodstained sword, and in his left, he clutched one of the ducal army’s spears.

“Why are you here? You can’t be here!” von Kilo spluttered.

The zlosta drew inexorably closer.

“Say something, you lumbering oaf! You ought to be tied up on the back lines!

And why—?”

Why is your sword covered in blood? von Kilo meant to ask, but before the words left him, something slammed into his chest. Hot wetness surged up his throat. As he clapped his hand to his mouth to hold it back, he looked down and saw the zlosta’s spear running him through.

“What...? Why...?!” he managed. Blood dribbled between his fingers. He fell on all fours as the strength left his legs. An enormous shadow loomed over him. Confusion, for the most part, filled his bloodshot eyes as he looked up, but there was panic there too.

“Struggling to breathe so... What a pitiful sight you make.” The zlosta’s expression betrayed no hint of emotion. He looked down at von Kilo with utter indifference. “You reap only what you have sown. You ought to have had more humility.”

He pressed the tip of his blade to von Kilo’s neck. “I carry a message from the One-Eyed Dragon.”

Von Kilo stared back dumbly.

“Your ill-considered mobilization of uncoordinated slave troops, motivated by your selfish desire for glory, invited confusion to your ranks. For this, he holds you personally responsible. In view of that, and your previous violations of military codes of conduct, you are hereby demoted.”

The declaration as good as pinned all of the Fourth Legion’s failings on von Kilo. The man’s mouth opened and closed, but no protests emerged, only blood and froth.

“Farewell, General...or perhaps I should say Second Tribune.”

If von Kilo meant to plead for his life or curse his foe, he never had the chance. His head sailed through the air, trailing a stream of blood.

Garda tossed his sword aside, turned his back on the corpse, and walked off. A short distance away, he met up with a band of sellswords. One of the men handed him a camel’s reins.

“Our work here is done,” the zlosta said as he swung himself onto his mount’s

back. "It is time we made ourselves scarce."

"You sure we're free to go, boss?" one of the sellswords asked.

"So I am assured...provided that we make quick work of it."

The man grinned. "Leave it to me!"

"Very well, then. Once you're ready, sound the drums."

"You got it! Everyone on the boss! We're getting out of here!"

Garda spurred his camel forward at top speed. The sellswords stayed close on his tail. At the sound of their drums, the freedmen infantry joined the flight, scrambling over themselves to leave the battlefield behind.

"Don't let the ducal army see your arses!" the sellsword cried. "Pickings are tough in the desert!" Amidst a chorus of vulgar jeers, he pulled up alongside Garda once more. "Not a bad job, if I do say so myself."

"Mercenary work through and through," Garda remarked. With a sigh, he glanced toward the main body of the Fourth Legion's forces. He and his men had played their part. All that was left now was to wait for the final act.

"I called you the One-Eyed Dragon, boy," he said under his breath, "but the Hero Slayer might have been more apt."

The illustrious Marquis Rankeel was no doubt coming to a similar realization. The nations of Soleil would tremble with fear to learn what had truly transpired on this battlefield.

"But now, I must flee, and quickly."

He had to make good his escape before the sandstorm cleared, or he might pay for his tardiness with his life. He had conjured the storm himself, but it would not last forever.

"If only I still had Bebensleif, I would not have to fear my mana running dry."

Unfortunately, now that his Fellblade had forsaken him, his mana was limited. Running dry would not be lethal, but it would mean passing out. On a battlefield, that was as good as a death sentence.

"I've done all that was asked of me. Now to rest on my laurels."

He pictured the boy's disagreeable face and snorted to himself.

*

The Lichtein troops' spirits were high enough to sweep even the Fourth Legion's advance guard aside—and still, Rankeel could not quell the unease roiling in his breast. His long years of experience were screaming in alarm. By the time the sandstorm lifted, his suspicions had changed to certainty.

"I cannot shake the feeling that we are charging into another trap."

"Is something wrong, Commander?" asked Karl beside him.

Rankeel answered with a reassuring smile before turning to summon one of his advisors.

"Yes, my lord?" the man asked.

"Have one hundred camel riders escort Lord Karl from the field."

"What are you saying?!" Karl protested. "Why must I flee? Is this not the time to push forward?"

Rankeel laid a hand on the other man's shoulder. "We have not won yet, my lord. We have crushed the Fourth Legion's advance guard, but eight thousand of them remain."

"But is the momentum not in our favor?"

"Victory is still far from promised."

Karl set a finger to his chin and sank into thought.

"Should the worst come to pass," Rankeel continued, "flee to the capital with your escort. We will buy time for your escape."

"And what will become of you?"

"I will hold the enemy here while you—"

"Enemies sighted at our rear! Three to five thousand men, mostly cavalry!"

The messenger's report sent a shock through the army. Soldiers turned to look, their breath caught in their throats. A large dust cloud was heading toward them. Flags bristled in its midst.

Rankeel turned to the messenger. “Are these the Fourth Legion’s troops?”

“They bear the heraldry of the empire’s eastern nobles, sir.”

“The eastern nobles? But why...?”

“The standard of House Kelheit is among them. It appears the east has sent reinforcements.”

“Did they not lack a leader? Has his widow taken a new husband?” Rankeel well remembered hearing of the death of the head of House Kelheit. He had hoped that the eastern nobles might tear themselves apart fighting over his succession, sending cracks through the empire, but little had come of it.

“There...is something else, sir.”

“What is it? Speak clearly, man.”

“The standard of the second emperor has been sighted on the battlefield. A dragon clutching a silver sword on a black field.”

“What?”

Nobody in this world could be ignorant of that heraldry—of the sacred standard of Mars, War God of the Grantzian pantheon and builder of the empire. Of the *sazul*.

“If you speak truly,” Rankeel said slowly, “that is an ill omen indeed.” A chill he could not quite name assailed him. His blood turned to ice, his fingertips went numb, his mind began to seize up. His voice trembled as he asked, “Are you quite certain?”

“If the history books are accurate, sir...”

“Was the second emperor’s lineage not extinguished?”

The Hero King of Twinned Black had passed away unmarried and childless, and not once had his standard graced the field since. Indeed, its unsanctioned use was punishable by death, regardless of the offender’s social station. Rankeel did not know why the imperials were so strict about the matter—fear of the Spirit King’s wrath, perhaps, or veneration of the deified Hero King—but if the *sazul* had been raised, it could only mean that the second emperor’s bloodline was alive and well.

“There will be no retreat to the rear, then,” he sighed. Better to take on the Fourth Legion, who would still be tired from the previous days’ exertions, than fresh reinforcements brimming with vigor. It would be foolhardy to engage these newcomers without knowing who they were or what they were capable of. The ducal troops had to press forward before the grasping arms of the enemy’s cavalry closed around them.

“Hesitation will gain us nothing. Charge!”

The ducal army might not succeed in breaking through the enemy’s center, but morale was high and they had momentum in their favor. That would be enough to at least see Karl to safety. This battle had been a lost cause from the moment the enemy appeared at their backs. High spirits would not save them from being slaughtered once they were surrounded.

“The fruit of my failings,” Rankeel said bitterly. “This is my cross to bear.”

He would wash his honor clean with a glorious death. He had been a warrior once upon a time, braving the melee himself with his sword as his only companion. There were worse ways to end his career than the way it had begun.

“I will clear a path, Lord Karl!” he shouted. “Take your escort and ride to safety!”

He did not wait to hear the man’s answer. It did not matter, in any case. All that remained was to pass the baton.

“Listen well, my lord! I leave to you my final stratagem! Now that we have burned their supplies, the enemy’s time is short! If they turn to pillaging, harry them from the rear! If they split up, crush them piece by piece! If you conceal yourself within the capital, provoke them and wear them down until they break themselves upon the walls!”

“What has possessed you?!” Karl cried. “You speak as though you mean to die!”

“Our nation is in your hands now!” Rankeel drew his sword and turned to rally his troops. “Have courage, men! Raise your voices high! This day, our enemy shall know defeat!”

With a roar, he plunged out of the sandstorm—and his hope gave way to despair.

“Impossible...” he breathed.

The soldiers who had preceded him into the dust cloud lay buried in the desert sand, their corpses studded with arrows. There were no survivors, only rapidly cooling bodies as far as the eye could see. The absurd sight brought the camels skidding to a halt, and the army with them. Karl blanched by Rankeel’s side, his brow creasing in dismay as he clapped his hands to his mouth.

“A dragon with a silver sword on a black field...”

Rankeel tore his gaze away from the flag, fluttering lazily in the breeze over the heart of the Fourth Legion, and looked to the sides, where the enemy cavalry was thundering toward them. A glance over his shoulder told him that the imperial reinforcements were closing in, their maw yawning wide to swallow their prey whole.

He chuckled darkly. “And so the trap snaps shut. There will be no escape, not even for Lord Karl.”

Before him stretched orderly ranks of light infantry, heavy infantry, and archers arranged in composite units—a masterful show of military discipline. How delightful it must be to lead such well-trained men into battle, Rankeel thought. Far more pleasant than commanding the exhausted pack of starving hounds at his back.

“I should have known something was wrong, right from the very start.”

His every stroke of inspiration had turned out to be anticipated. Every opening he had found only seemed to play into his foe’s plans. Since the very beginning, he had been dancing in the palm of his enemy’s hand.

“Then I suppose he already knows what I will do next.”

Karl had to survive, no matter what. Only Rankeel need pay the price of this defeat.

“Lay down your weapons and raise the white flag.”

The sword slipped from the hand of the man once called the Rising Hawk and

thumped into the sand. His soldiers sank to the ground, defeated. The dull metal of their discarded weapons glinted in the sun, signaling their surrender for all to see.

“Yet one answer eludes me: to what end did the enemy crush me so thoroughly?”

Scratching at the old scar on his cheek, Rankeel watched the War God’s *sazul* waving indifferently over the imperial lines.

*

No clouds marred the clear blue sky to shield the earth from the sun’s merciless gaze. The relentless heat leeches the vigor from those who dwelled below. Surveying the terrain revealed only sand stretching endlessly away, a telling glimpse of the land’s arid heart.

Here in the Duchy of Lichtein, a nation ruled by scorching deserts, a battle had come to an end. What name this battlefield would take in the ages to come, no one could say. For now, it had none.

Fierce-eyed soldiers stood in ranks, masterfully wrought armor shielding their chests, lethally sharpened swords and spears in their hands. They were the Fourth Legion of the Grantzian Empire, protectors of the south, born warriors all. At the heart of the army, surrounded by a heavy guard, were its commander, Liz, and her strategist, Hiro.

Liz raised a hand to shield her eyes from the sun’s glare as she stared at the array of standards in the distance.

“Is that...House Kelheit’s livery? But why would my sister be here?”

Her confusion was understandable. For the eastern nobles to make their way here via the southern territories would take no small amount of time, all the more so with an armed force in tow. Hiro moved closer, intending to offer an explanation, but she sensed his approach and spoke first.

“Would you care to explain what my sister is doing here?”

“Is that what it looks like to you?”

“Who else could it be? Look at all those eastern noble flags.”

Hiro chuckled knowingly. “There certainly are a lot of them.”

Liz turned to stare at him, her neat eyebrows drawing together. “And just what are you smirking about?”

Hiro put a hand to his mouth, trying to hold back his grin, but the gesture only annoyed Liz more. She puffed out her cheeks in indignation.

“Sorry, sorry,” Hiro said. “So how many do you think there are?”

“Erm... About three thousand?” She sounded irritated, but she still took the trouble to consider the question. That earnestness was one of her best qualities.

“Try five hundred.”

“What? But how?”

“It’s a small force impersonating a larger force. They aren’t even from the eastern territories. They’re Kiork’s men.”

“Uncle Kiork?”

“That’s the one.”

“But they’re bearing the eastern nobles’ standards.”

“They are. I asked to borrow them.”

“So you’re saying they’re Uncle’s men, just carrying the eastern nobles’ colors?”

“That’s right. Not a bad plan for such short notice, if I do say so myse— Yeowch!” Hiro’s sentence turned into a yelp as Liz pinched his cheek.

“So that’s what you were acting all smug about.”

“Yesh.”

“Have you learned your lesson or should I keep this up a little longer?”

Hiro fell silent, thinking very carefully about what to say next.

“I’m very hurt, you know,” Liz quickly added. “I want an apology.”

“Ih’m very shorry.”

“That’s a good start. Now you just need to buy me a present and we’ll be square.” Her hand finally withdrew.

“All right, but nothing too expensive.”

Liz’s eyebrows arched. “That’s funny. I heard you just came into a lot of money.”

“That’s true, but I was planning to save it.”

The money Rosa had given Hiro would be vital for his future endeavors. His first priority was putting together a private force, which would need to be paid. Admittedly, he had parted ways with a handy sum of coin in recent days to fund his schemes, but he intended to recoup that from the duchy. Needless expenditures were still to be avoided.

“Don’t worry,” Liz said. “I won’t get anything *that* pricey.”

That could mean anything coming from a princess. It would be wise to set an upper limit. “All right, but no jewelry,” Hiro said, feeling like a deadbeat husband.

Liz waved her hands in front of her face, flustered. “Oh, never! Jewelry looks terrible on me anyway.”

“Really?” Hiro cocked his head, looking her over. Her face still had some of the softness of youth, but her smile was as bright as a flower in bloom and her shapely body would bring a sigh to anyone’s lips. If she hadn’t chosen to walk a soldier’s path, she might well have been the belle of the empire.

She might be right. Jewelry wouldn’t suit her.

She needed no adornment, anybody would agree. A roadside pebble would shine like a jewel at her throat. Anything more would be quite literally gilding the lily.

“All right, then,” he said. “Once all this is over, we’ll drop by Linkus.”

“I’ll hold you to that. On pain of Lævateinn.”

Hiro laughed weakly. “That sounds...lethal.”

“You’ll be fine. Well, maybe a *little* singed.”

Second Tribune Drix looked on as their banter continued. “From a distance, anyone would think them two ordinary children,” he murmured.

One was a Spiritblade’s chosen, the other carried the blood of Emperor Schwartz. He wondered if they truly understood the significance that carried.

“At the very least,” he whispered, “the world will rejoice at the return of the Kerukeion.”

The Kerukeion was an old sobriquet for the brother-emperors Artheus and Schwartz. After a thousand long years, their bloodlines had once more reunited. Once upon a time, Artheus’s encounter with Schwartz’s wisdom had set him on his path of conquest, and the parallels were uncanny—the sixth princess possessed Artheus’s uncommon ingenuity, and now she counted one of Schwartz’s descendents among her retinue.

This, Drix decided, was getting interesting.

It was only recently that the first prince had, at great length, won the allegiance of one of the long-lived álfar. The third prince, too, was beginning to win renown thanks to talents of the wunderkind he had dubbed Aphrodite.

“But whether this prophesizes glory or ruin for the empire...will all depend on how His Majesty plays his hand.”

Competition for the throne would only grow more heated. One false move could mean civil war, and that would lead to the fracturing of the empire itself.

“Lord Drix,” came a voice from behind.

Drix turned to find a messenger kneeling before him. “Yes?”

“The commanders of the ducal army, Count Karl Lichtein and Marquis Rankeel Gilbrist, have been captured.”

“Excellent work. Ensure that they are treated well.”

“Of course, my lord.”

Once the man had departed, Drix approached Hiro and fell to one knee. “Lord Hiro, the ducal army’s commanders appear to have been detained.”

“I’ll speak with them at once,” Hiro said. “Have a tent set up.”

“I’ll see it done.”

“Please.”

With another bow, Drix departed to set the stage for the coming negotiations.

*

Rankeel took his seat, overcome by confusion. Beside him, Karl seemed to be of a similar mind; the man’s sallow face wore a discomfited but otherwise unreadable expression. Both had good reason to be apprehensive. It was a universal truth that prisoners of war could not expect gentle treatment, but they had received neither abuse nor violence. They had been stripped of their weapons, but their hands had been left unbound. Their captors had even escorted them like guests of honor to their destination: a tent that was pleasantly cool, in spite of the midsummer desert’s searing heat.

“What is the meaning of this?” Karl wondered aloud.

“It is some new plot of theirs, my lord. Mark my words.”

Rankeel sounded more confident in his words than he felt. He stroked his chin, muttering to himself. Even his mind was struggling to wrap itself around this puzzle. The enemy had nothing to gain from further trickery. Disposing of Karl and himself would be enough to ensure the duchy’s collapse. Widespread noble defections would plunge the land into civil war, bandits and brigands would run rampant, and in time, his home would become a barren place where only monsters roamed.

“Do you suppose they want our land?”

“They’ll raise that, I don’t doubt, but they hardly need us alive to take it.”

If the enemy wanted territory, they could simply execute Rankeel and Karl and carve off as much as they liked. Unpleasant as it was to admit, with Rankeel dead, none of the remaining nobles would have the spine to try and retake their lost land. They would fold without resistance.

“We may have lost,” Rankeel continued, “but we are not obliged to bow and scrape. If they try to force unreasonable demands on us, you are well within your rights to spit them back in their faces.”

“But that would mean...” Karl’s downturned face twisted in anguish. No doubt the man feared that offending his captors would see his head roll, but Rankeel had enough tact not to broach the subject aloud.

The guilt of their defeat weighed heavily on Karl’s shoulders, but he would need to take such experiences in stride and grow from them if Lichtein was to have a future. The nation’s woes, both internal and external, were far from over. Important decisions would need to be made, and there was no guarantee Rankeel would be present to lend a guiding hand. If their present circumstances had a silver lining, it was that they presented Karl with an excellent opportunity to learn statecraft, the better to see through noble deceit.

“I leave the final decision in your hands, my lord.” Resolve burned bright in Rankeel’s eyes.

Karl gave a hesitant nod.

An indeterminate time passed in silence, long enough for their glasses of water to grow lukewarm. Rankeel took an experimental sip, but the liquid inside was odorless and inert. He smiled ruefully at his own wariness. He had not sincerely expected poison, but the risk of assassination had been a fact of his life for many years. Some habits were hard to break.

A brisk set of footsteps approached the tent, and a teenage girl stepped inside. She wore the military uniform of the Grantzian Empire with a ceremonial overcoat—not unlike a haori—on top. “A pleasure to meet you,” she said. “I am Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz, commander of the Fourth Legion and sixth princess of the empire.”

Rankeel had never seen her before, but her beautiful countenance matched the rumors. There was no doubt that she was who she claimed to be. It was not suspicion that brought a frown to his face, but the sight of the crimson sword at her hip.

So that’s a Spiritblade. The first I’ve seen in person, but even I can tell it’s no ordinary weapon.

Looking at the princess and her sword in turn, he immediately understood why some called her the Valditte. Perhaps naturally for a Spiritblade’s chosen, she carried herself with a conqueror’s presence that belied her years. Such

people were to be feared, Rankeel knew. Their talent was quick to grow. Still, her flame was still feeble and her potential had yet to blossom. It could not have been her who outwitted him on this battlefield.

The boy who entered the tent next struck Rankeel speechless.

He wore an old-fashioned imperial uniform with a black overcoat on top. Embroidered dragons twined along his shoulders. A large eyepatch covered one of his eyes, and half of his face besides, but even so, Rankeel could see—

He carries Uranos?!

Also known as Baldick, the Umbral Sight, the black iris of Uranos most often graced heroes of myth. Rankeel knew it well. In fact, nobody in the world could be ignorant of its significance. Only one man in all of Aletia—at least, until now—had ever born the mark of the twinblack. One did not have to be familiar with the Grantzian emperors to know the name of Mars.

It seems surprises never cease this day. To think his blood yet lived...

Never before had Rankeel seen the Baldick in person. He, like everyone else in Aletia, had thought it the stuff of legends.

“I am Hiro Schwartz von Grantz,” the boy announced, “strategist to the Fourth Legion and fourth prince of the empire.”

His face was utterly unreadable. Outwardly, he was smiling, but he exuded the unsettling impression that, behind his gaze, he was constantly scrutinizing everything around him. The depthless darkness of his black eye seemed to scour Rankeel’s very soul, an abyss before which all deceit was laid bare.

“Excuse me, sirs...”

An official who introduced himself as Second Tribune Drix laid two sheets of parchment before Karl and Rankeel. “Please read through these and sign them, if you would be so kind.”

Rankeel turned his gaze to the terms.

The Duchy of Lichtein hereby cedes its northern territory to the Grantzian Empire and promises to issue reparations to the same for lost assets and

military expenditures.

Furthermore, the Duchy of Lichtein and the Grantzian Empire hereby enter into a non-aggression pact for a period of two years, although the Grantzian Empire retains the right to annex any portion of the Duchy of Lichtein in the event of a threat to national security.

Those aren't bad terms, Rankeel thought. Not bad at all. The northern territories are hardly a breadbasket, and losing one oasis city won't be the end of us. The empire will no doubt try to meddle within our borders under the guise of peacekeeping, but we can turn that to our advantage. And as for reparations...the old duke died sitting on a sizable hoard of private wealth. That ought to fetch us the coin.

He tried to send Karl a meaningful glance, but he was interrupted by the black-haired boy drumming his fingers on the table.

"I suppose you only have my word for this," Hiro said, "but in the event that the Republic of Steissen attacks Lichtein, you can rely on imperial aid. You will have to foot the bill, of course."

"Do you mean it?" Karl rose from his seat. That was far easier promised than done. By sending reinforcements to Lichtein's aid, the empire would risk starting a war with Steissen. It already had its hands full trying to reassert order in Faerzen—surely it would want to avoid getting involved in more hostilities.

"Only if you want, naturally."

"What of the war in Faerzen? Do you have the authority to promise your forces elsewhere?"

Hiro flashed Karl a smile. "The imperial military will hardly notice the loss, I assure you."

Rankeel shuddered at the gesture. This boy was plotting something, that much he could tell, but the shape of it was shrouded in darkness, and he could only fumble for it blindly.

Hiro spread his hands toward the sheets of parchment. "If you find my terms acceptable, may I ask you for your signatures?"

There was no time to try and gauge the boy's intentions, and trying to stall would only make him worsen the offer. Rankeel glanced sideways to see Karl pick up the pen. With a sigh of defeat, the marquis signed his name as well. Hiro took the parchment from their hands, checked that all was in order, exchanged a few words with the sixth princess, then handed the signed agreements to the advisor at his side.

A silence followed, until finally Rankeel spoke. "I'd ask you something, if you'll hear it."

Hiro turned his gaze on the marquis. "Of course. What's on your mind?"

"I must admit to being outmatched in battle. You surrounded us handily. If I'm not mistaken, you employed much the same strategy I used against your forces."

Rankeel had sought to lull the Fourth Legion into overconfidence with a string of easy victories, lure them deep into enemy territory, and surround them once they were exhausted from battle with the Liberation Army. Meanwhile, Hiro had baited the ducal army into believing that they had the upper hand with his false supplies, allowed them to overcommit to an inescapable situation, and surrounded them once they were exhausted. There were superficial differences, but the more Rankeel thought about it, the more the broad strokes seemed remarkably similar.

"So a man has to wonder, if only for the record...did you plan your approach in advance or did you choose it to put me in my place?"

"I see why it might have seemed that way. I realized what strategy you were employing from reports of the ducal army's movements, but I only decided on how to counter it around the time I joined the Fourth Legion."

"And that was when General von Kilo was still in command, I suppose?"

"That's right. I didn't know what state I'd find the Fourth Legion in, so I didn't know in advance what kind of approach I would need."

"I see."

The boy avoided giving a direct answer, but the truth seemed to have been somewhere in the middle. He had concocted a variety of plans in advance, but

he had deliberately chosen one that mirrored Rankeel's own in order to break the man's spirit.

"If that's all, the Ministry of Military Affairs will dispatch a messenger shortly. You may direct any further questions to them."

Hiro and the sixth princess rose. The latter left first. As Hiro made to follow, Rankeel hurriedly stopped him.

"One more thing, if I may. Why did you let me live? I am not a man for boasting, but the name of the Rising Hawk is one that our people love and our neighbors fear."

Rankeel was not ignorant of his reputation as a national hero. If he was of a mind to swear revenge against the empire, he could easily mount an invasion once Lichtein was on more stable ground. Surely this boy was too intelligent to have overlooked that possibility.

"I admit my defeat, but even now, a part of me burns to reclaim my honor," he continued. "It would be in your interest to snuff out such sparks before they could catch."

He was astute enough to know when he was beaten, but that did not mean that he would bow easily. Being so late in the game, perhaps his question amounted only to a beaten dog's whining, but he felt compelled to ask it, even if it earned him derision. The old scar on his cheek itched as he stared at the boy's back.

"I would have your answer."

"Marquis!" Karl hissed. His face was deathly white. If this boy took offense, both their heads could roll within minutes. Indeed, Drix was glaring at them with open disapproval, and had he been in Hiro's place, he likely would have ordered Rankeel put to death.

Fortunately, the twinblack prince was more magnanimous. Hiro looked back over his shoulder. "You're a clever man," he said, gesturing to Rankeel's scar. "I'm sure you can work it out."

With that, he left. Drix silently followed.

Once they were gone, Karl let out a long breath and turned to Rankeel. “What were you thinking? They could have— What’s wrong? Why are you sweating?”

Rankeel knew only too well. Every inch of his skin was awash with cold sweat. In the moment Hiro had turned around, he had been assailed by a cold and overpowering bloodlust. Never in his life had he felt more certain that he was going to die.

Karl drew closer, concern in his eyes, but Rankeel was worlds away.

If Lichtein is to survive, there is only one course.

Karl would be no match for Hiro. Only a handful of men alive could withstand such an aura of might.

If we fail to prove that our lives were worth sparing...

The madness Rankeel had glimpsed in the depths of that black eye would stay with him for the rest of his days.

...he'll come for both our heads.

Rankeel traced his scar with trembling fingertips. This had been a warning—that their lives were the boy’s to take. A castigation and a curse for them to carry into the days to come.

Epilogue

Beneath a clear blue sky, a column of men and horses snaked through the heat-choked desert. Their faces were cheerful, their minds fixed on home. It was the fourth day of the ninth month of Imperial Year 1023, and the Fourth Legion was returning from their campaign.

The line was abristle with standards of all colors, but the livery of the sixth princess and the fourth prince stood out above the rest. The royal column advanced beneath their shade.

“I wonder how Cerberus is doing,” Liz said wistfully as she rode.

“Sulking, probably,” replied Hiro alongside her. “Maybe you should buy her something on the way back.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never left her alone so long before. It’s been over a month.” The shadow of a frown flickered across her face, but a beaming smile soon replaced it. “But I’m sure she’ll be fine. I made sure she’d have her paws full.”

“Dare I ask what you did?”

“I appointed her commander of Berg Fortress while I was away.”

Hiro blinked. “You what?”

“Made her commander. She was surprisingly excited about it.”

“You do realize that’s not a ceremonial post? It has actual duties.”

“I wrote to Uncle about it. He’ll take care of all the paperwork.”

“I suppose that’s all right, then. Well, not for Kiork...”

Hiro felt a surge of pity for the man, but considering Kiork doted on his niece like a daughter, he would probably be delighted to help. The real question was where Tris had been in all this. It was the duty of the princess’s aides to curb her whims. Hiro shot the man a disapproving glance, but—

“Lady Cerberus makes a fine commander,” the old soldier said approvingly. “I’ve seen few more single-minded in their duties.”

“Oh, really.”

Cerberus certainly was single-minded...as animals typically were. Tris’s soft spot for the white wolf could sometimes get a little out of hand.

“I had no idea you were so hard-pressed, my lord.” Drix joined the conversation with a laugh. “Well, worry not. You have me by your side now, and paperwork happens to be my specialty.”

Hiro opened his mouth to reply, but Tris got there first. “Splendid!” the old soldier exclaimed, urging his horse closer to Drix’s. “I’m glad to hear it!”

A hearty clap to Drix’s back drove the breath from his lungs with an “Oomph!”

“This old body wasn’t made for clerical work,” Tris continued. “As much as it shames me to admit, I have been foisting much of it on Lord Hiro here.”

He had been foisting *all* of it on Hiro, but the boy bit his tongue.

“With all due respect, Sir Tarmier, I do outrank you. You ought not to be so familiar—”

“Bah, never mind all that. Tell me, lad, how well do you hold your liquor?”

““Never mind’? I—”

“You what?” Tris’s stern expression drew threateningly close.

“I... I can drink as well as the next man.”

“Excellent. Then what say we break open a cask to welcome you to the fortress?”

The wind carried Tris’s hearty laughter over their heads and away. Liz smiled with affection as she looked on.

Hiro, for his part, put a hand to his forehead. He could feel a headache coming on. “We still need a civil tribune...” he groaned. As he lowered his eyes, a shadow fell over him.

“One-Eyed Dragon. How go matters with Mille?”

Hiro looked up to see Garda's enormous figure.

"Fine. Her village is along our route. Once we're close, I'll have her escorted home." Hiro intended to leave it there, but he saw the concern lingering in Garda's eyes. "If you're worried about her identity getting out, that won't be a problem. Liz will send her most trusted men to do the job."

"And she will truly be safe there?"

"Of course. Threst is imperial territory now. It'll be safer from bandits and monsters than ever. Besides, it's close to Berg Fortress. You'll only be a couple of days' ride away."

The moment he learned that Mille came from Threst, Hiro had realized why he found her so familiar. Threst was the name of the village he had passed through en route to the Fourth Legion. Moreover, its mayor, Kukuri—who had been kind enough to share his scant possessions with a passing stranger, if one who had ridded his home of bandits—was Mille's father.

"I wouldn't have thought you were such a worrier."

"I want to see her safely home, as much as the words stick in my craw, given the peril I put her through. She deserves a peaceful life. One where her involvement in all this cannot chase her." Garda glanced back at Mille's transport. "I must thank you for furnishing her with a carriage."

The desert heat was too harsh for a child. To leave her on horseback for an entire day's march would be nothing less than torture.

"Don't worry about it. It's the least I can do." Hiro gave a sheepish grin. He could hardly treat the girl poorly when he owed her father a debt.

"I suppose the question now," Garda continued, "is what shall become of me."

The zlosta now had no place to call home. Prior to washing up on the shores of Soleil, he had been an inhabitant of the southern archipelago of Ambition. To hear him tell it, the islands were currently ravaged by a period of internecine warfare. Indeed, Garda had once been one of the dozens of warlords vying for supremacy, with several territories under his command. Defeated in battle by a powerful rival, then finally betrayed by his vassals while he plotted his return to

prominence, he had died—or so he had thought, only to awaken on the shores of Lichtein. After learning of the plight of the duchy's slaves, he had embraced a new cause with Mille at its head, only to meet defeat for a second time at Hiro's hands.

"I have a few ideas," Hiro said.

Garda might have lost his Fellblade and warlord's learning, but he was still a formidable warrior, and his victory over the old Duke Lichtein testified that his command of an army had not dulled.

"At any rate, don't worry. I'll treat you well."

"Your face tells a different tale." Scowling, Garda fell back toward the carriage.

Hiro returned his gaze to the fore. Far in the distance, beyond the horizon, lay the imperial capital of Cladius.

I expect I'll be receiving a summons soon. Only time will tell what'll be asked of me next...

The thought was enough to darken his mood. Whatever was coming next, if he didn't find a way to solve it, there were many who would jump at the chance to undermine his reputation. At the same time, however, he found himself looking forward to the chance to outwit them.

I can't let myself get carried away. That's a bad habit of mine.

He had to take things slow and steady, accumulating victories where he could and building up his reputation. He was only a third class military tribune. That wasn't a strong enough foundation to build on, even with the rank of fourth prince to shore it up. The road to his ultimate goal was long, and he had only barely begun.

That reminds me...

Hiro reached into his pocket and produced a strip of stiff card—the seal Artheus had given him before he had returned to Earth.

At the time, it had been entirely white, but one-third was now stained black.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up volume 2 of *The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles*. If you're jumping in here for the first time, welcome. If you've been following since volume 1, welcome back.

While my goal for volume 1 was to show off my protagonist as a cool and capable warrior, for volume 2 I harnessed every scrap of my modest intellect to portray him as a cunning strategist. I hope that came across, and I hope you enjoyed the result. As long as you had a good time reading this book, I could dance for joy.

With the military aspects of the story coming to the fore, this volume expanded the character list quite a bit, with new faces both major and minor. I have a habit of inflating the male side of the roster when left unsupervised, which causes my editor, S-sama, no end of grief. I can only apologize. I don't even realize I'm doing it; I just keep writing men! Still, quite a few male characters didn't survive this volume, which gives me a good excuse to fill the gaps with some attractive female characters. I hope you look forward to that.

Oh, I almost forgot. Were you aware that there's a thing called "After the Afterword" on the official Overlap Bunko homepage? Artheus is showing off his best brotherly side over there, so please take a look if you're interested.

Anyway, I'm starting to push my character count, so that's enough babbling to myself. I have people to thank.

To Miyuki Ruria-sama, who produced such beautiful illustrations for the second book running and brought out all of my characters' best sides; to my long-suffering editor, S-sama, who so graciously allows me to make edits right up to the eleventh hour; to everybody in the editorial department, the proofreaders and the designers; and to everybody else involved in the creation of this book, thank you.

And thank you in particular to those returning from volume 1, as well as those who followed my Shosetsuka ni Naro uploads. If it weren't for you, this book

would not exist. I plan to keep on churning out chuunibyou from here on out, so I hope you'll stick around.

May our paths cross again someday.

奉 (Tatematsuri)



**The
Mythical
Hero's
Otherworld
Chronicles**

2

Tatematsuri / Illust. Miyuki Ruria



“Hiro’s gone.”

Liz



*“You’re the
last person
I expected
to see.”*

Aura



“We could do it now, if you like.”

Hiro Oguro

Rosa

Bonus Short Stories

Drunk and Disorderly

“Got that? Hm? Or should I beat it into you?”

One of Aura’s petite hands held a glass while the other smacked the man’s bald head over and over. Her drunken grin didn’t quite reach her eyes, and the contempt in her gaze would strike terror into anyone’s heart.

“Lady Aura, you will not slander my magnificent person so!”

The man glared up at her in between smacks, but kneeling submissively as he was, he didn’t come off quite as intimidating as he might have liked.

Pathetic, Hiro thought, to think the third prince would be reduced to this...

“‘My magnifishent pershon,’ is it? And what would you be without me? A headless corpsh, thatsh what.”

The four of them were alone in a private chamber reserved for powerful nobles. That was the only reason Aura’s tirade had gone unpunished, but that only seemed to embolden her.

“You are insulting the mighty Third Prince Brutahl, soon to be the...the mightiest emperor of the mighty Grantzian Empire!” A vein throbbed on Brutahl’s forehead.

Aura smacked his bald pate again. “And if Third Prinsh Brutahl had any sensh, he would shut up and shtop calling himself ‘mighty.’ Or at least exshpand his vocabulary.”

The man ground his teeth. “I will not stand for this impertinence!”

“Please forgive her, Your Highness.” The long-suffering von Spitz bowed his head in Aura’s place. “She has had a little too much to drink.”

“I fixshed the war that you shtarted and I reshtored the Third Legion’s reputation that you ruined and now you’ve shpoiled all my hard work, you idiot,

you imbeshile, you king of all boneheads!” Aura didn’t even pause for breath. Her open-handed chop caught Brutahl square in the dome.

That was the final straw. The prince stood up, glowering with indignation. “You will not address your commander so! I did only what I believed would benefit the western houses!” He fell to his knees and began to weep, smacking his fist against the floor. Apparently, he was a sad drunk. The chiseled set of his face only made the sight more pitiful.

Aura’s tirade was unrelenting. “Then you thought wrong! And if you think shaving your head in penansh will win you any favor with Hish Highnesh, you don’t even know your own father!”

Smack smack smack smack smack. Brutahl’s head was turning red as a tomato, but still he protested. “My aides advised me to demonstrate my remorse through action!”

“By winning victoriesh, you dolt, not by shaving your head! Nobody wants your shtupid hair!”

“I-Is that what they meant?” Brutahl’s jaw hung slack, as though he had been slapped across the face. He hung his head.

Aura’s gaze swiveled to Hiro. “And don’t think I’ve forgotten about you!”

“Me? What did I do?”

She set a finger to her chin in thought. After some time to choose her words: “You try to carry everything on your own shoulders. Shtop it.”

Hiro chuckled. “I guess you’ve got me there.”

Not that her warning would stop him. Wherever plunging into the fray would save lives, he would do it. To watch others suffer on his behalf was painful. To watch them die for his cause was intolerable. His power was not yet absolute, but someday, he would be strong enough to save everyone. That was the reason he had sought strength in the first place.

Aura sighed heavily. It seemed that she’d read his mind. “That’sh shtupid, and you know it. You’ll bring shorrow to the same people you’re trying to help.” Her eyelashes quivered as her eyes hardened with conviction. “Shomeday, I’ll fix

those boneheaded ideas. But until then, don't do anything reckless."

"I'll try." Hiro smiled sheepishly. He was dodging the issue and he knew it.

With another exasperated sigh, Aura turned back to Prince Brutahl to find the man sprawled on the floor, muttering to himself. He had thoroughly passed out.

"And I had the perfect chance too. All washted." Aura glared at Hiro with naked accusation, although it had been her who had pushed the man to the brink. "Well, it doesn't matter. Another time."

"I'll look forward to it." Hiro nodded. Turning her down seemed like more trouble than it was worth.

"A toast, then, to our future reunion." Von Spitz approached, wine in hand, an amiable smile on his face.

Aura took up her own drink. Hiro was too young for liquor, but he raised his water high. The gentle clink of their glasses pealed through the room.

"To our reunion!"

The night grew later, and the stars shone brighter, as though blessing the hopes and dreams of men.

Dreams of a White Wolf

"Who are you?"

Hiro opened the door to the study on the third floor of Berg Fortress to find an unfamiliar girl yawning beneath a pile of books.

"Hm?" She cocked her head at him, uncomprehending.

Her hair was white, her eyes were ocher brown, and her shapely figure could not help but elicit a gasp. Moreover, she was entirely naked, with not a single scrap of cloth to protect her modesty.

"Umm..." Hiro began. "How did you get in? If you're looking for the baths, they're downstairs."

This seemed like something he didn't want to get involved with. Better to get her out of his hair so he could get back to reading.

“I hate baths,” the girl snapped.

Hiro frowned. “I don’t know how to say this but...why aren’t you wearing anything if you’re not looking for the baths?”

She shook her head emphatically. “I don’t wear clothes.”

So she walked around naked all the time? For a moment, Hiro was speechless, but then a thought struck him.

“One of our soldiers didn’t snatch you, did they?”

The Duchy of Lichtein’s invasion had thrown Berg Fortress and the surrounding settlements into disarray. It wouldn’t have been surprising for some of the troops to get up to no good in the chaos. This girl was certainly pretty enough to catch an unscrupulous soldier’s eye.

“Do you remember who took you?”

Commonfolk or nobleborn, that was not a crime that could be overlooked.

“It’s all right. I won’t let them hurt you. Can you tell me who it was?”

The girl let slip another yawn, then tilted her head thoughtfully. “Liz,” she said at last. “With the red hair.”

“You have to be kidding...”

She wouldn’t...would she? It was hard to imagine Liz violating the law in any way, let alone for *that*. Gears ground in Hiro’s brain as he found himself with a dilemma on his hands.

“If she’s losing her way, I have to nudge her back onto the right path.”

As he made up his mind to give Liz a stern talking to, the white-haired girl’s hand fell on his shoulder. At some point, she had moved to stand by his side. He turned to face her, then immediately looked away; he didn’t quite have the nerve to openly stare at a girl in the nude.

“A-Anyway, how about we get you some clothes? You must be freezing.”

“Mmm...”

“Right? That’s why— Oof!”

Hiro's voice turned into a yelp as the girl pushed him over. Something soft pressed against his chest. Sensing danger, he tried to extricate himself, but her arms wrapped around his body, preventing his escape. At the end of the day, she was a girl and he was a boy; he could have broken out if he'd tried, but—

“Hey... Hey! Hold it! What are you doing?!”

As her hand slipped inside his uniform, she bent down to gently lick his cheek. Her tongue glistened red on the fringe of his vision.

“The same thing I always do.”

“The same...?! I don't even know who you are!”

“Yes, you do. We do this all the time.”

“I don't know what you're talking about! Now get off me! What if Liz sees?!” Hiro shuddered to imagine the disgust in the princess's stare.

“She won't mind.”

“Try telling her that!”

“Try telling me what?”

As Hiro tussled with the white-haired girl, a shadow fell over him. There was no mistaking that voice. He looked up to see Liz practically glowing with rage, her fists clenched in fury.

“I see *someone's* enjoying himself.”

“It's not what it looks like!” Hiro protested. “Besides, she wouldn't even be here if you hadn't—”

“No excuses!”

“Guh!” Hiro grunted as her fist smacked squarely into his face. He sat up, nursing his cheek. “Ouch! What did you do that...for...?”

His teary-eyed whimper trailed away as he looked around.

“Huh? Liz?”

He scanned the room, but Liz was nowhere to be seen. There was only a book lying on top of his head and Cerberus curled up at his feet, looking up at him

blithely. He rubbed his forehead and cracked a sheepish smile.

“Just a dream, huh?”

“Ruff!”

If he hadn't known better, he would have sworn the white wolf's bark sounded faintly amused.

A Widow's Wiles

It was the dead of night when Hiro woke from restless sleep, and the wind was pawing at the windowpane like a whining beast. He was lying on a sumptuously decorated bed with an ornate chair and desk nearby. Beside that, the room was empty. The lack of furnishings left it looking, if not threadbare, at least a little forlorn.

Rosa must have gone somewhere...

The young widow who had fallen asleep by his side was nowhere to be seen. Hiro eased himself from the bed, stretching his neck, and approached the desk. He filled a glass from the carafe of water and drained it in a single gulp.

“Huh. I wonder how they keep it so cold?”

His words had been meant for himself, but the shadows in the corner of the room stirred in answer. He jumped back, alarmed, to see a servant sinking into a bow.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I am one of the mistress's ladies-in-waiting.” The woman said only that before falling silent once more.

Hiro smiled awkwardly. He glanced down at his glass. “Did you leave this?”

“I did indeed. We are commanded to replace the mistress's water periodically to ensure it stays cold.” She opened the door and gestured toward the hallway. “You have been sweating in your slumber, Your Highness. You will only stain the sheets if you return to sleep now. A bath has been drawn for you, if you would like.”

Hiro opened his mouth to refuse, but the Black Camellia tightened around his throat. *Take a bath*, it seemed to say.

“I might just do that. Maybe I am a bit sweaty...”

He wasn’t certain, but if his longtime partner was that insistent, who was he to refuse?

“Very good. Please follow me.”

The lady-in-waiting stepped out into the corridor. In short order, she led him to the mansion’s balnea. Hiro parted ways with her at the door to the changing room, stripped off the Black Camellia, and strode into the steam-filled baths. He whistled as he looked around.

“Did they boil all this specially for me?”

The bath itself could easily have seated ten people. Heating that much water could not have been an easy task, but then, the great houses weren’t known for half measures.

Hiro groaned with pleasure as he sank into the water. “It’s no hot spring, but it sure is nice...”

It was hard to suppress a pang of longing for Berg Fortress. He might have gone to sleep on the spot, but at that moment, he saw movement in the steam. A human silhouette approached through the haze. For a moment, he wondered who it could be—the servant hadn’t warned him to expect company—but then he saw, and blanched.

“So it is you. I did wonder who could be using my balnea at this hour.” Rosa stood in front of him, making no particular effort to cover herself. Her voluptuous curves glistened seductively, hidden only by the steam. “I’m impressed you found this place.”

Her cheeks were a little pink, but it was hard to tell whether that was from embarrassment or simply the heat.

“Your lady-in-waiting said I should take a bath...although she didn’t mention you’d be here too.”

Rosa burst out laughing. “She did, did she? I see, I see!” She moved to stand

beside him, wiping tears from her eyes. “Please don’t think ill of her. She can be a little...proactive, shall we say, on my behalf, but she means no harm.”

“I don’t mind, but aren’t you going to cover yourself up?”

“Why? We’re lovers now, aren’t we? Whatever would the court think to see you so scared of my body?” She cupped her ample breasts in her hands. “Did you know a woman’s chest floats in water? Liz used to go green with envy every time we took a bath together.”

Come to think of it, Hiro *had* found Liz holed up in Berg Fortress’s study, poring over books on female anatomy...

“Can’t tear your eyes away, hm? I do pride myself on my volume.”

Hiro hadn’t even realized it, but his eyes had been glued to Rosa’s chest. He hurriedly turned his back. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Now, now, don’t be like that. I’ll come over all bashful.” Rosa pressed herself against him, pushing her breasts into his back.

“I-I should go!”

Hiro tried to step up out of the bath, but Rosa’s grip on his wrist snatched his feet from under him. As he tried to regain his balance, he collapsed hands-first into the twin mounds of her chest. The softness made his head spin.

Rosa pouted. “Not *quite* so hard! That hurts, you know.”

“I-I’m sorry! I didn’t mean...” Hiro sprang away.

A sly smile crept across her face. “Be gentler this time.”

“Right. Got it.” Without thinking, Hiro stretched out his hands, but then his eyes widened and he pulled them back. “Hey! I’m not falling for that!”

“Ha ha ha ha! What’s the hurry? Come now, enjoy your bath. A night can last a long time, especially in the capital.”

Hiro obediently sank back into the water, but Rosa’s wiles would soon make him wish that he had left right there and then.

The Archpriestess, the Princess, and the Boy: Redux

“Well met, Master Hiro. I hope you are not finding your new life too taxing.”

“Not at all.” Hiro’s smile was slightly stiff.

The álfen woman did not seem to believe him. She drew closer, cupping his cheeks in her hands. “You are quite certain that you are in good health?”

Hiro’s face burned. Her delicate arms would be easy enough to brush aside, but the archpriestess of Frieden was not so easily refused. Laying hands on her could spark a diplomatic incident—not to mention alarm her retinue of knight-priestesses, who would be quick to draw their swords.

Even Liz knew better than to intervene. Still, that didn’t stop her from glaring. As the archpriestess’s ministrations continued, she eventually reached the limit of her patience.

“Haven’t you prodded him enough?”

The crimson-haired girl’s anger washed off the archpriestess’s blithe smile. “Why, Your Highness, I hadn’t noticed you. Do you know, I must have mistaken you for an open flame somebody carelessly left in a grate.”

The odd turn of phrase drew a perplexed look from Hiro, but the álfen woman only put a finger to her lips and smiled.

Liz’s mouth pursed ever so slightly. “Well,” she said, “I wonder what your followers would think to see you start your day ogling a man’s body.”

“They would be overjoyed to see an archpriestess of Frieden reunited with the Spirit King’s chosen champion, Emperor Schwartz—through his descendent, Master Hiro, of course.”

Hiro sighed wearily as the two glared at one another. He and Liz weren’t in Baum to argue. They had returned with a handful of bodyguards to recover the soldiers who had been wounded crossing Mount Himmel.

“Right!” Liz announced. “Time’s wasting.” She sidled up to Hiro and hooked her arm pointedly through his. “But we should be heading back to Berg Fortress. Thank you ever so much for treating our men.”

The archpriestess’s smile never faded, but the warmth seemed to drain from it. She shook her head serenely. “Must you hurry home? Your guards must be

exhausted from the journey, and dinner is already on the table. Will you not rest here awhile?”

Delighted murmurs rose from the soldiers at their backs, although they were quickly silenced by a glare from Liz.

The princess turned back to the archpriestess. “We’re flattered, but our provisions will be more than enough, and we will have plenty of opportunities for rest on the way.”

“Are you certain that is wise?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Your companion seems rather set on staying.”

The archpriestess gestured toward the entrance of the Spirit King’s sanctum, her smile widening. Hiro and Liz followed her gaze.

“Here you are, Lady Cerberus. The finest cuts, fresh off the bone!”

“Have you heard of redsalt? You can only get it here in Baum, but it brings out the flavor of meat like nothing else!”

“You—!” So that was where Cerberus had gone. Apparently, the white wolf had been busy being bribed by the archpriestess’s attendant knight-priestesses.

“What are you doing?! Get back here this instant!”

Liz’s protests fell on deaf ears and a wagging tail. She watched in mute betrayal as Cerberus vanished into the sanctum, enticed by the fragrance of cooked meat.

The archpriestess turned back. “It seems the matter is settled. You will be joining us for dinner after all, I take it?”

Liz kicked at the ground like a sulking child. “Why does Cerberus always think with her stomach?”

“Follow me, Master Hiro.” The archpriestess seized Hiro’s arm and pulled him along.

“Hold it right there! You can’t take him anywhere without my permission!”

“You speak of him as though he were your property. If that is how the royal

family view their subjects, the future of the empire is bleak indeed. How Emperor Artheus would weep to see what his bloodline has become.”

Liz ground her teeth. “Fine! Fine. We’ll stay a *short* while and no longer.”

If Hiro’s memories were anything to go by, Artheus had been far more headstrong than Liz. He would never have offered even that small compromise.

“Very good. I shall attend to Master Hiro, of course.”

“Over my dead body!”

The two continued to bicker with Hiro sandwiched between them. As the trio crossed the threshold of the Spirit King’s sanctum, a gentle breeze blew past, and for just a moment, the rustling of the branches sounded like Artheus’s laughter.

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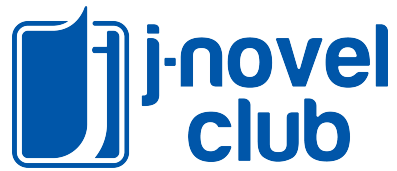
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by Tatematsuri

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